GROWING WILD

Also by Michael Wilding

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To Deborah

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Foreword

'Your letter came as a shock surprise,' my parents wrote, when I told them I was thinking of going to Australia. But it shouldn't have really, for my grandfather had gone there some sixty years earlier. Australia was part of the family myth. My father would reminisce how the mushrooms used to come up after a thunderstorm on the Darling Downs. He recalled the sailors holding him over the side of the ship on the way there, or the way back, they didn't stay long, my grandmother couldn't take it, living in a humpy out in the middle of nowhere, grandfather putting in fencing posts, they came back to England. Next time when my grandfather went to Canada he went alone, to bring the family later, but they never went there, he came back to the foundry. And there was Uncle George on my mother's side who had an orange plantation in Sydney which the lawyers swindled him out of. That was another family myth even if no one seemed too confident about its veracity.

Australia had always been a presence in my childhood. Cleaning up the house after my mother had a stroke, I discovered some old diaries I had kept as a teenager and I thought, ah, I might be able to use something here for a novel. I couldn't. Use anything. It was all teenage despair, even less interesting than the mature despair I had ready access to. But on one page there was a doodle of a map of Australia. It dated from when I was fifteen. Beneath the map was a note. 'I seem to have drawn a map of Australia. Why is that? Does that mean I am going there or something?'

So I can claim a sort of Australianness as well as Englishness. Though it's often hard to say where anyone ultimately comes from, once you start looking into things. My paternal grandfather who came to Queensland was born in America, after his father had jumped ship, running away from the English Midlands. The Wildings were a family of runaways and escapees, as their surname readily implies. ‘Ten ruddy Wildings saw I in the wood,’ John Dryden wrote in his translation of the *Æneid*. A restless family.

So I suppose I could claim to come from America, at some distance. And then back in England, well one set of grandparents was called Haffner, which is a Germanic name, but where they came from I don't know. And another lot were supposedly French Huguenots. And then on my mother's side apart from the family myth that we descended from the Black Prince, there was a possible claim to Celtic descent. Great Uncle Will Griffin used to play the Welsh harp. And we lived on the borders of the Marches, that borderland between England and Wales, where the Anglo-Saxons and Danes and Normans bumped up against the Welsh. So anybody living there might expect to be of mixed descent.

But how important is this search for one's national identity, one's defining ethnicity? If asked where I come from, it is more meaningful for me to answer that in class than in national or ethnic terms. From the working class. The experience of class discrimination is something that seared deeply into me. It is one of those themes that is not explicitly taboo; it's just that if you write about it much,

you get the response of, ‘Boring, boring, boring,’ or, ‘Oh, he's not still going on about that.’ Class is not a feature of the cultural debate these days. In the agenda of political correctness, in which gender and ethnic analysis is privileged, class analysis is strikingly refused. The University of Sydney distributed to all its staff a pamphlet on discrimination on grounds of ethnicity and gender, and listed all the words you couldn't use any more, and warned you of all the things you mustn't do or think any more: but nowhere in this list was there any mention of class discrimination. And yet this remains the largest discrimination of all. I once asked how many working class students there were at the university, and I was told the numbers were not known and it was too difficult to find out. So writing about it, I've tended to deal with the theme obliquely, slipping it into a story that ostensibly deals with some other theme. I managed to insert it into a story, ‘Reading the Signs’, amongst attempts to describe what a flying saucer looked like. The *New Yorker* asked me to confirm that the characters called Mum and Dad were fictional and not based on real people.

‘Dad wrote to the paper. “As an iron-moulder, it seemed to me like a glowing red ball of molten iron.”

‘Sometimes he would be at home with burns on his hands or feet from the molten iron that had spilled. Now he is at home dying of emphysema from the foundry dust.

‘“It was just like the molten iron when it comes out of the furnace.”

‘Mum was furious, embarrassed. She went red.

‘“I never expected them to print it,” Dad said. “I just wrote it as information for them.”

‘Other people in town had sighted it. There were other letters.

‘“You might have known they'd print it.”

‘“No, I didn't, so that's that,” said Dad.

‘Mum was mortified. On the forms at school we wrote “Engineer” not “Iron-moulder.” Filling in the forms for university, I went off to a private place and my stomach wrenched for a long time and for “Father's Profession or Occupation” I crossed out “Profession” and wrote “Iron-moulder.”’”

In the end, to try and escape all the varieties of discrimination, I decided I wanted to be a writer. In those innocent days when I made that decision I thought being a writer was just being a writer – I didn't know it was a role that nationalist politics, market forces, arts bureaucracies and the political professionals were eager to control. I thought being a writer was being a writer. Well, it still can be: you don't have to be taken over. And I thought being a writer you could say excessive things, troublesome things, even outrageous things, and get away with them. And even when I found out you couldn't get away with them, it still seemed worth saying them. By then it was too late to change, anyway. It had become a habit.

David Lodge once asked me in perplexity, or maybe even in exasperation, ‘So what are you? Are you an Australian writer or an English writer?’ I suppose I wanted to be both. Or maybe neither. Transcending mere nationality. A citizen of the world. A writer. That was my youthful ideal. Nationalism as far as I could see had caused an awful lot of suffering. A slogan beneath which

politicians and arms-manufacturers could send young men out to die for them. Women, too, these days. Internationalism seemed a good thing. Globalization has taken the gloss off that a bit lately, though it's not what I had in mind.

The writers I admired were many of them expatriates. Lawrence Durrell, Christopher Isherwood, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence. It seemed the way to go. The future looked bleak in England. Three years at Oxford had made it clear to me that if you came from the working class, you were never going to be accepted by the ruling elite. And the ruling elite ran the cultural show. Oh, you might find yourself a niche, as long as your politics were conformist, as long as you basically accepted the order of things and said so. But you'd always be a sort of upper-servant. Well, my mother's family had been upper-servants.

Issues of expatriation have never been an explicit concern in my fiction. No doubt subterranean themes can be detected. And in writing critical essays about Lawrence and Conrad and James and Marcus Clarke and William Lane and Jack Lindsay and Christina Stead, no doubt at some level I was drawn to the expatriate. But strategically it has always seemed to me a bad idea to get into the business of comparisons. H. M. Hyndman tells of a nineteenth century Englishman who was asked how he liked Melbourne. 'He replied, with the drawl that was habitual to him, "Immensely. But don't you think it is a little far from town?"'

But being a Midlander, I never had much acquaintance with town, anyway.

Dame Leonie Kramer, launching a book of mine, compared me to Byron, which I thought was jolly nice of her. 'Shaking the dust of England from his feet,' she elucidated.

Well, it was rather like that.

As that famous old boy of my school, Adam Lindsay Gordon, wrote in 'An Exile's Farewell,'

'I shed no tears at quitting home,

'Nor will I shed them now!'

As for what effect a change of place has on a writer, Gordon dealt with that succinctly in his poem 'Doubtful Dreams,' which fellow expatriate Marcus Clarke published in the *Colonial Monthly*.

'I have changed the soil and the season,

'But whether skies freeze or flame,

'The soil they flame on or freeze on

'Is changed in little save name.'

The thing about writing, it has always seemed to me, is you just sit down and do it. Write. Wherever you are, about whatever you know, whenever you can. Where you've been, where you are. Like Clarke and Gordon, at times I've turned back to writing about England, at other times I've written about Australia. No regrets. I am doing the same thing here.

Much of the fiction I have written has been autobiographical. I have tried not to duplicate that material here, though once in a while I quote from it. Nor have I repeated my recollections of the Wild & Woolley publishing years, which I have written about separately.

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Among Leavisites

It was an afternoon in early Summer in my last term at Oxford. I was sitting on a bench in the inner courtyard of college, having a break before returning to the library. From an upper room came the sound of a typewriter, erratic but urgent.

'Wallace must be writing his book at last,' I remarked.

Wallace Robson, famous as the foremost English literature don, even approved by the great Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis, was also famous for never, at that stage, having written that book, his book, any book at all. Though once he had left Oxford he produced several.

The typing stopped and shortly afterwards he emerged from the foot of the staircase and scuttled, head down, out of the quadrangle.

I looked in my pigeonhole on the way through the porters' lodge. There was a letter in it. No address, just my name on it, clearly hand delivered. It was a typed note from Wallace asking me to see him some time in the next few days. I wondered why he hadn't just given it to me in the courtyard. Perhaps he hadn't seen me.

'Come in, come in,' said Wallace.

I went in.

'Oh, hello,' he said, that note of surprise, but polite welcome. Not put out, just vaguely puzzled.

'How are you getting on ?'

I said I was getting on well.

'That's good,' he said.

The conversation, such as it was, lapsed. Wallace looked across anxiously, his brow furrowed with that frequent expression of concern, seriousness, puzzlement. I seized the initiative. I had to. This was my allowed half-hour coffee break between the morning sessions in the library. I should soon be due back.

'You asked me to see you.'

'Oh yes,' said Wallace. 'Yes. So I did. Do sit down.'

I sat.

'Have you ever thought of going to Australia ?' he asked.

'I can't say I have,' I said.

'Oh,' said Wallace. 'My very good friend Sam Goldberg has a job going there.'

It was my turn now.

'Oh,' I said.

'A lectureship in Sydney,' said Wallace. 'Jut for three years.'

'Mmm,' I said.

'Of course some people find they miss things there. *The Times.* And they don't much like the Australian accent. Especially in women.'

Neither seemed a major obstacle.

'Anyhow, go away and think about it and let me know what you decide.'

I got up to leave.

'Better than being a junior bottle washer in Sheffield,' he added.

I don't think he ever mentioned that he had once spent a term teaching in Australia.

I have no initial impression of Sam Goldberg that I can remember. I think he might have met me at the airport, but even of that I am not sure and have no memory. Of airport meetings my only recollection is the story of the previous professor, Wesley Milgate, meeting a new arrival, shortly before having his breakdown and retiring to the Blue Mountains to play the organ in some parish church or dissenting chapel.

'I never wanted to be professor,' he said. 'I never wanted to be an administrator. Stationery, stationery, they expect me to keep a track of stationery.'

Or was the stationery part of another story, of his knocking on every staff members' door and giving out airmail letter forms after administration had complained about the department's stationery consumption?

'Here, take some of these, go on, take more.'

The reason for thinking Sam met me is that I remember being in his house on arrival, a modern yet dark, gloomy two story red brick house. It had nothing in architecture or situation to recommend it. I had expected a view of the harbour, boats, seagulls, but there was no view, no sign of water.

Accommodation had been arranged for me in a college. He described where it was in relation to the university and the teaching hospital and what was the best way to get to the department.

'I'm sure Michael would be more interested in where the nurses' hostels are,' his wife said.

I remember that. I think she had been a nurse.

'So what do you want to teach ?' Sam asked me.

I had no idea. I had just taken finals. It was all literature, all accessible, at least up to 1870 when the Oxford syllabus had ended.

'I don't mind,' I said. I tried to be more specific. 'Anything except Milton,' I said.

Milton had been a compulsory author in my first year, and compulsion rarely endears.

'That's it then,' he said. 'Milton it is. I don't want some Miltonist teaching Milton.'

Perhaps I had expected to gain merit from my proposed exclusion. Milton was a particular bugbear of the Leavisites. Perhaps I had expected a complicit smirk at my correct taste, my gesture of avoidance.

I had certainly not expected this new compulsion. Compulsion it was. I demurred. But I got nowhere.

That was the first uncertainty, so early on, at the very beginning, indeed. Apart from Milton I chose, or agreed to the suggestion of, the novel course. That was why I had come to Sydney, after all, the path of the novelist. It would be sensible to learn something of the novelist's art. And whereas the Oxford syllabus had ended in 1870, this course included the moderns: Conrad, James, Lawrence, Faulkner: what passed for the modern at that time, certainly books too modern for Oxford. I was to teach it together with a lecturer Sam had inherited when he had taken over the department. Most of the lecturers he had inherited. He was trying to stock the place with new talent, Leavisites he had taught or taught with in Melbourne, or recent graduates with a seal of approval from Cambridge or, at a pinch, Oxford. But Bill Maidment, with whom I was to teach, was one of the old guard, the unreconstructed.

'I want you to keep an eye on Bill,' Sam said. 'I'm not sure about him.'

I was twenty-one. I had never taught before. I felt uneasy about this instruction. The foreman's job was one I had never sought. Complicity with authority had never appealed. This was the second uncertainty.

Sam's Leavisite agenda requires some definition. Leavis and the Leavisites saw themselves as oppositional. They opposed the way English Literature was generally taught at university. They opposed the preoccupation with history and literary history, who wrote what when, what followed what. What they specifically stood for was harder to define. They put an emphasis on criticism, on developing a critical response to the literary work. They saw English as the central discipline of the humanities and the humanities as the central discipline of the university. I remember a slogan of the time, 'A training in literature is a training in life,' though whether it was authentic or parodic I am not sure. But it makes the point. Their stress was on honing the critical perceptions, developing a responsiveness, sensitivity, discrimination. This involved a lot of rejection. While the literary historians like bibliographers aimed at an expansiveness, even, up to a point, an inclusiveness, the Leavisites stressed the importance of making discriminations, and then rejecting the unworthy. Life, wrote Dr Leavis, was too short to read *Tom Jones* again. Or was it even a first time. Milton went. Shelley went. These negative assessments were strongly expressed. There were positives, of course. Shakespeare was allowed. Keats. George Eliot. Henry James. D. H. Lawrence. Though even within the œuvres of these writers discriminations had to be made. Working, however, in the existing university with its unreconstructed departments of English, it was their negations that became most familiar, and the negative assessments, the devastating dismissals of the unworthy, were what stuck in the mind.

Such vociferous negative assessments of the received tradition gave the Leavisites the aura of opposition. Yet it was, as with so many tolerated oppositions, pretty much an illusion. It was no accident, as the Marxists used to write in those days, that they vehemently rejected Milton and Shelley, those political revolutionaries. We were against the Marxists, Leavis wrote, even though the title of his journal *Scrutiny* was taken from a 1920s collection of essays by the then Marxist critic Edgell Rickword.

Generated in the 1930s, the Leavisite project set itself against both the existing literary establishment and the emergent left-wing critique. In this they were like that wave of literary theory of the late 1960s that similarly presented itself as oppositional. It was no accident, to use that useful phrase again, that Leavisites found a ready home in the British Council, promulgating their purportedly anti-establishment oppositional literary programme through the Commonwealth, Europe and the Americas. It was a safe opposition. It did not shake the foundations of the state or the economic order. It drew on the oppositional youth who knew, instinctively or by instruction, that a commitment to socialism or communism would not be a wise career move. It recruited its followers from lower-middle class and working class students who felt excluded from the patrician traditions and styles of the older universities, who loved literature, who needed to believe that a study of literature was serious work, not ruling class relaxation or dilettantism. In the absence of a tradition of left-wing cultural critique, the Cold War purges having obliterated the serious left from the acceptable face of literary studies, the Leavisites seemed to provide a focus, a home, for the emergent oppositional critic. Overall, it was a very effective control mechanism.

The Leavisite project laid great stress on education. The analogy with the Jesuits was often drawn, the get them young and you've got them for life principle. But until he had got them young, Sam had to make do with what off-the-peg Leavisites he could find. Once he had the system set up he would breed his own. Until then it was a matter of imports. There were overseas imports like me. And there were interstate imports from Melbourne where he had previously taught.

He had taught at Melbourne though not been in charge. There were enemies to the cause there. But Melbourne also housed a strong Leavisite cell. After all, was not Sam's own Leavisite house journal called the *Melbourne Critical Review*? Some good had been done at Melbourne and he imported some of those done good to there. Even so, there was the hanging suggestion of the stop-gap about them. They had not been reared in an absolutely contagion free environment. Somehow Sam intimated, or they inferred, that they were not one hundred per cent sound. They sensed that their days were numbered. Though when their number came up would depend upon how efficiently the Sydney rearing programme could be got underway. Yes, it had the note of one of those eugenics programmes, some committed sect isolated in the jungle, preparing for a new millennium.

Germaine Greer had been taught by Sam in Melbourne and then completed an M. A. in Sydney. Sam took her on as a senior tutor. She herself announced that she was only a stop-gap, only temporary, not totally trusted. She announced most things about herself, a disarming candidness that was all the more aggressive and invasive for your having unwittingly been disarmed. She was tall, large-boned, loud, and she took me up. Her boyfriend, Paul Thom, was slight, diffident, pretty in a fey sort of way, nervous, mocking, and an accomplished harpsichordist. He drove the car as she showed me round, organized expeditions to see flats, buy cooking pots.

'That's where the prostitutes hang out,' she said, pointing to the wall of the museum at the bottom of

William Street. 'Just in case you get the need in the night.'

I was shocked, no doubt as I was intended to be.

'You're wearing the same clothes as yesterday,' she remarked of me at morning tea.

The various tea drinkers looked across at me.

'Who was the poor girl who took you home after the party? Or is it your grubby Englishman's lack of laundry training?'

It was the latter, more embarrassing and humiliating than any publicized sexual success. It was generally the proclamation of the sexual that she employed for her sorties.

'I had a kitten once,' she told me, at morning tea, was it? or at a party. 'I used to suckle him in the bath.'

I think that image haunted my sleepless nights for weeks.

'If I want to sleep with a black man when I go to England,' she announced on the top of a bus, in those days there were double-deckers, was this to me or to John Wiltshire who later told me, or was it perhaps used on both of us, 'if I want to sleep with a black man I don't want some English landlady telling me I can't have him in my bed.'

But before she slept with the black man and confronted the English landlady, she had to get to England. She took a Cambridge entrance examination. Another graduate in the department, Lee Sonnino, had entered for an Oxford exam. I was delegated to invigilate them. It was my first allocated work, since I had arrived in Sydney in late October, the tail end of the teaching year. The examinations were taken in the Muniment room, a splendid, high-ceilinged, mullion windowed room in the clock tower, used for occasional staff meetings and the storage of old examination papers and a jumble of books, some surplus to library requirements, others donated by the United States Information Service.

The night before there had been a party. There were always parties in Sydney. You drank endless beers in the pub in the evening and then drank endless draughts of flagon wine afterwards at the party. I felt sick. I was sick. I had to keep leaving my examinees and running down the stairs and out into the quadrangle to the hole in the wall and vomit in the lavatory. I nervously assured myself there was no way they could have cheated in those sort of exams when I was out of the room. The rest of the time the fire alarm kept going off above us in the clock tower and fire engines would roar up with bells ringing and park outside, their motors throbbing a deep bass pulsation beneath the bells.

They were both successful, both admitted to their chosen colleges. Germs, I was sure, would be frozen out in Cambridge. She was too loud, too coarse, too extreme, too gross, too embarrassing for England. There would be no career for her there, I was sure, she should have stayed in Australia. But it was impossible to explain that to her without offence, so I didn't try.

She was very helpful to me. When I was sick she insisted I went to her doctor who had a surgery beneath one of the approach ramps to the harbour bridge, the doctor who had cut the polyps from her reproductive organs, as she often told me, and anyone else who might be induced to listen, and maybe, she seemed to suggest, cut out rather more so that she could now never have children. I remember her

walking withdrawn and sad and lonely along the oysters on the foreshore of the harbour at Double Bay, in dramatic, even cinematic, expression of grief. When my teeth needed attention she sent me to her dentist, and ten years later on study leave in England, back in Oxford again, I opened the Sunday paper to find her face filling the cover of the colour supplement, her mouth wide open in some expression of ecstasy or outrage and the row of fillings brought it all back to me. He had rooms in Macquarie street, opposite the State Library. He was a good dentist who didn't talk at you all the time. Once in a while over the years he asked after Germaine, where was she living now, did I have an address?

I was grateful for these solicitudes. But I rather blew it getting drunk at a party one night and thanking her for them, more than effusively, insisting she was my earth mother. She became quite annoyed and told me to grow up and remarked again on my English trousers, with pleats and tucks at the front of the waistband as if, as she put it, loudly, you had all withered and shrivelled away down there.

In *Penny Dreadful* Penelope Nelson adds a detail of which I was blissfully unaware, though might have guessed. "'Do you know," she – Germaine – asked me indignantly on one occasion, "that Geoffrey Little actually thought I was living with Michael Wilding? God! As if I was into grotty little unwashed Englishmen!"

We did indeed live in the same house for a while until she had me thrown out. I had met Margaret Clancy and spent a lot of time in the house she shared in Paddington. I forget how many people were living there, the population shifted and changed, but there were quite a lot. Germs moved in and decided we were too many. She insisted that some went. I was targeted as being an illegal, and Margaret was targeted for having let me in. I was in a vague and not too hurried process of looking for somewhere anyway. Germs insisted on the process being accelerated. So Margaret and I went. After that the relationship between Germs and me was decidedly chill and we rarely communicated again.

Margaret and I found a terrace house in Paddington which we shared with John Wiltshire, who came out from England in the new year. He had read English at Cambridge under Leavis himself, or under Leavis's protégé Morris Shapira, or both. He was, anyway, a fully guaranteed Leavisite. We must have corresponded, perhaps we even met in England though I cannot remember the occasion, and we had agreed to share a house in Sydney. A beacon of light, a centre of civilisation, to wean the ignorant millions from their horrid ways.

'I've often thought that what I would like,' said John, 'was one small bookcase with all the books that really mattered. Only the ones worth reading.'

He evoked it there, not a large bookcase at all, I could see its three short shelves, maybe two, somewhat smaller than a small chest of drawers. Twenty years later he achieved some academic distinction with a study of Dr Johnson's illnesses.

Since I was no longer speaking to Germaine after she had had me evicted, I had no idea of her current involvements. So it was a surprise when she rang the doorbell one evening. We let her in.

'I'm not staying,' she said. 'I've come to find John. I want my key back.'

He wasn't in so she left, not, I am sure, without some disparaging look or remark at our domestic cosiness. We gave him the message when he returned. He offered no comment, no elucidation, no explanation, but turned rather pink and stumbled upstairs. We took that as explanation enough.

Sam asked me to write a piece for the *Melbourne Critical Review* and I began work on a review of some recent work on Milton. Predictably there was a lot of editorial intervention and suggestion. There was a strong sense of a collective critical project about the *Review*, much discussion and rewriting and incorporation of correction. It was not an approach I appreciated. I began work on another piece for *Southerly*, the quarterly edited by Gerry Wilkes, the Professor of Australian Literature, about Adam Lindsay Gordon. Gordon was the one distinguished literary figure of my old school, and I had been proud secretary of the Adam Lindsay Gordon society, the writers' group there. It was his third school and he had attended it only briefly. Then came the incident in which he was to ride in a steeplechase, but the horse he was to ride had been impounded for debt. He liberated it from the stables and in some accounts won the race. Formal charges were avoided, but Gordon was shortly after packed off to Australia. Where he became a mounted policeman, naturally enough. He achieved fame as a steeplechase rider and poet. Aged 36, he shot himself the day after his last book of poems was published, in debt and unable to pay the printer.

This was one of the anecdotes of literary Worcestershire I had come across, the sort of thing I had been publishing in those articles for the local paper, *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, in the year between leaving school and going to Oxford, and had continued to write at Oxford. 'Turnip Shortage Annoyed Cobbet,' s'Defoe Spied On Worcester But Was Unimpressed With What He Saw,' 'Beavers, Bevere and Barbourne', 'The Fox-Hunting Literature of Worcestershire'. That sort of thing. The headlines weren't mine, but I rather liked them all the same. *Berrow's* claimed to be the oldest surviving newspaper in the world, dating from 1690, though the World Association of Newspapers puts it number seven on the list of oldest newspapers still in circulation. I explained something of this to John Wiltshire one day when I showed him the folder of clippings.

He was profoundly shocked. 'I don't think you should show these to anyone else,' he advised.

But I persevered with Adam Lindsay Gordon, examined the various contradictory accounts of his departure from England and established nothing but uncertainty. I got my sister back in England to look up *Berrow's* for an account of the Crowle steeplechase at the appropriate date. It reported that all horses had been entered under false names and all riders rode anonymously. I thought it made an interesting article, not least in its absolute inconclusiveness: 'Adam Lindsay Gordon in England: The Legend of the Steeplechase'. It was the sort of antiquarianism that was anathema to the high seriousness of the Leavisites. I only ever did write for the *Melbourne Critical Review* that once. But Gerry Wilkes published my Gordon article in *Southerly*, and I began to write book reviews quite regularly for him. And I also wrote two last pieces for *Berrow's* drawn from my recent reading: 'When Henry James and

His Friends Were in Broadway' and 'Henry James' Letters from Malvern.' The latter even got reprinted, in the *Malvern Gazette.*

Germs was already in place when I arrived. But the Tomlinsons arrived in the New Year. They were Sam's heavy infantry, a husband and wife team from Melbourne. Jock was tall, rather shambling, slow of speech. He was diabetic. 'If he goes into a coma, just shove a biscuit into his mouth,' said Maggie. How would you know, we wondered cruelly, waiting for his utterances, painfully delivered after long reflection. Jock was presented as the thinker, the sage. Maggie was the performer, the charismatic teacher. She had jet black hair pulled back in a tight bun, vivid red lipstick, the whole effect severe, a Spaniolated George Eliot. She held forth, rather loudly, and had sherry parties for a select few in her rooms after four o'clock. This was something quite alien to Sydney's traditions. Sydney functioned as a colonial training centre. The architecture of the quadrangle was splendidly mid nineteenth-century Gothic, with an eighteenth-century neoclassic solidity, the window frames spacious and square, free from the replicated medieval pokiness of the Gothic revival. But its teaching traditions were strictly functional, producing teachers and functionaries for colonial business and administration. Its degree structure and hierarchies were based on the Scottish system. It had no time for effete ceremonies. Indeed, even from Oxford I remembered no afternoon sherry parties. But Maggie had been at Cambridge and this was something she had encountered, or claimed to have encountered, there, all a bit Garsington and Bloomsbury, mannered ceremonies and cultured conversation. Cambridge was the constant touchstone for civilization in her utterances. Buying oranges in Cambridge market the touchstone of the European experience. Why anybody should privilege orange buying in England in this country of prolific orange production was a mystery. You had only to drive to the outskirts of Sydney to see the orange orchards. Perhaps it was coming from Melbourne, perhaps they were an exotic fruit that did not grow there. As for English markets, I had always found them rather dubious and tatty: again there were splendid markets in Sydney with their own associations in the literary tradition. But Maggie and Jock and Sam were not especially into the local literary tradition.

All the English market stuff seemed to me rather pretentious, pathetically so even, at the time. But they were trying to maintain something, some style, some panache, in that sad demoralization of the tropics so celebrated in their admired Conrad. I was no doubt too harsh on them. But already I had taken on a Sydney note, with all its disdain for Melbourne's preoccupation with European style.

Apart from the approved Leavisite classics, Maggie was an enthusiast for the Drama. It was on Maggie's theatrical style, full-volume delivery, and cosmopolitan pretensions that Germaine had first modelled herself as a student in Melbourne. It was something Germaine readily admitted, her admiration for Maggie, even if the modelling had become harder to detect beneath the eclectic accretions Germaine had since acquired. But she still wore her hair pulled back in a tight severe bun, like Maggie, though slightly dishevelled compared with Maggie's carefully controlled coiffure.

Classical Greek drama was a specialty of Maggie's. Now one of the principles of the Leavisites was a

focus on the words on the page. They rejected the paraphrases and remote listings of literary history and required a close reading of the text, a rigorous analysis and exquisite savouring of the texture of the poetry or prose. So that teaching works in translation seemed somewhat to contradict this emphasis on the word, the letter, over the idea. It became a focus of dispute, even if not always vocalized, this teaching works in translation, one of the many sites of objection to the Leavisite faction from the resistant members of the department that Sam had inherited.

I was drinking in the staff club bar one lunch time with Ron Dunlop, one of the Sydney traditionalists. No doubt we had stayed in the bar too long. We noticed on the floor, placed there to mop up some spillage or other, some pages of a newspaper in Chinese characters.

'Must be Maggie's lecture notes,' we quipped.

A few more middies later we salvaged the paper and stuck it in her pigeon-hole when we went back to the department, with a scribbled note repeating our *aperçu*.

She was not amused. I had to explain myself to Gerry Wilkes, the other professor.

'They act like they're early Christian martyrs,' was his only comment.

But this might have been later, after the department had split in two.

Sydney's English department was not without its history. Sam had been imported to try to do something about a troubled situation. When A. J. A. Waldock had died, the two heirs apparent – at least in their own estimation – were Guy Howarth and Harold Oliver. Tradition has it that they were bitter rivals, united only in their opposition to Wesley Milgate when he was appointed to the chair each had felt was properly his own. For a while they pursued policies of non-co-operation, then Howarth went to a chair in South Africa and Oliver to one at the University of New South Wales, leaving a shaken Milgate who, finding it all too much, in due course resigned. So Sam had entered a situation in which he was not without potential support. Many welcomed the idea of a new broom. What they did not welcome was being swept away by it.

At first some were eager to work with him, so the story goes. I was not there in those initial stages, so report this only on hearsay. There was Derrick Marsh, who had come from South Africa where he had written a study of Shakespeare's last plays while in gaol for infringing or speaking out against some apartheid regulations. There was Peter Davison, who had grown up in an orphanage and served in the Royal Navy and was working on a study of music-hall traditions in drama. Later he was to edit *The Library* and the twenty volume edition of George Orwell. He tended to play the music-hall Englishman, not always consciously, perhaps. He was said to have brandished a pair of underpants with holes in them to his class, complaining about the quality of Australian manufacturing. These were both genial souls, whom I found welcoming to a newcomer. Most of the department seemed genial enough. Though I got off on the wrong foot with poor Andrew Riemer when he told me about a play he was editing to be published by the University of Madras Press.

'Why Madras?' I asked.

He didn't look Indian. I couldn't place the rather guttural accent, couldn't even hear it clearly it emerged.

'Madras?' he said, expostulated indeed. 'Why on earth would I publish in Madras? Nebraska,' he barked, 'Nebraska.'

Madras sounded no less reputable than Nebraska to me, rather more so, in fact, probably with excellent British colonial cultural traditions. As it happened the edition never appeared, neither from Nebraska nor Madras, some dispute over editorial method proving insuperable.

But Sam rejected them all. It became increasingly clear he wanted to deal with no one contaminated by the old regime.

Sam's ideal of teaching was the small group, tutorial or seminar. A tutorial programme had been recommended by a governmental report a few years earlier. But the big, old lecture programme was also still in place. You could be facing up to four hundred students in a first year lecture. Those were the days when students were reputedly told to consider themselves, the person on their left, and the person on their right. 'One of the three of you will be failed in the end of year examinations.' It wasn't such a bad system. It let large numbers have a chance, and maintained some sort of standard after they had been given their chance.

This was in the days when medical students were required to do one year of an Arts subject, when students on teachers' college scholarships were required to do two or three years of English. Again, not a bad system. But it did mean large numbers. Lectures were repeated, not only later in the week but also at night for the evening students. By the time you had given the same lecture for the third time to an audience of two or three hundred on each occasion, it had become rather stale. And hanging around at night till the evening lecture, at 5.15 or 6.15 or 7.15, could be hazardous if you spent the time at the bar. I remember rushing across from the staff club to a lecture theatre, thinking I was late, bursting through the door and up to the dais, to find a startled looking figure already holding forth. I had got the wrong day.

There was a horde of such stories. The lecture theatres were mainly old, nineteenth century, tiered, timber-panelled halls, though occasionally we were given a more recent concrete version. You had to project your voice. They did not have microphones except for the Wallace theatre, the huge theatre for first year lectures. There a new lapel microphone had been installed. Derrick Marsh was lecturing in it one time when some drilling or hammering began at the back of the building. He stopped and went backstage or outside to ask the workmen to hold off till the end of the hour, but he had not long begun again when they began too. He went back and asked once more. At the third time he lost his temper, stormed out, forgot to switch off the microphone and delivered a splendid succession of obscenities and blasphemies, all that a study of Shakespeare in a South African gaol could provide, amplified through the theatre. Another time the Miss Engineering beauty contest was scheduled for lunch time in the theatre, and those engineers wanting a good seat in the front rows had packed in early, arriving for the

English lecture the hour before. They soon got bored, began to talk, in the end perhaps to heckle. The lecturer, Tony French, tried in vain to quieten them, lost control of the situation, stormed out, fell down the steps to the platform in the rage of his departure, and broke his collar bone.

I have fond memories of Ron Dunlop. He was always impeccably polite, always generous, always friendly. He had a somewhat military appearance, clipped moustache, blazer. He had served in New Guinea in the second World War and had been involved in the post-war war crimes trials of the Japanese. The war experiences were said to have curtailed his early promise as a poet and critic. If you look at the early issues of *Southerly*, you can find some of those poems. In the times I knew him he no longer wrote verse. But he broadcast regularly on the ABC's book review programme. And he was a stalwart of *Poetry Australia*, the poetry magazine edited by Grace Perry after she broke away from the Poetry Society. A splendid eccentric, poet and doctor, it was Grace who asked me to persuade Robert Adamson to let Dr Lazarus have a quick snip of his pituitary gland to calm him down, but Bob's partner Denise said no. Ron used to organize the book reviews for Grace, and recruited reviewers from those in the department who stooped to read contemporary poetry in those days.

Ron gave me one piece of invaluable advice. It was the same advice that the Duke of Windsor claimed was the only useful thing his father ever told him. Never pass a *pissoir*. Ron supported his argument with an anecdote about his good friend and colleague Gus Cross, with whom he edited *A Bibliography of W. B. Yeats*. Gus, after his habitual lunch at the staff club bar, suddenly had to rush out from his lecture, claiming some missing notes or an urgent phone call, and headed for the hole in the wall in the quadrangle. He was necessarily in something of a hurry, and on his return to the lecture dais, his shoes were noticeably sprinkled with moisture, much to the amusement of the assembled students. The laughter from the front rows spread through the hall.

There was much to entertain students in those days. Ron, like Gus, was a great enthusiast for Willie Yeats, as he fondly referred to him. Probably trapped too long at the bar one time, he began his lecture on Yeats only to find that he had forgotten to bring along the volume of letters in which he had marked the passages to quote. The story goes that he gave the lecture nevertheless without the quotations, and the following week read the passages themselves without repeating the context, to the bemusement of his students.

'It's amazing,' the professor of Early English said to me once, 'how different a response you can get repeating a lecture. I gave one this morning and they were their usual sullen and dull selves. I repeated it this afternoon and they applauded.'

Enquiries established that the students had been so bored they had given him the slow handclap. But a long lunch at the bar had spared his realization.

This was the somewhat raffish tradition of the place that Sam had inherited, more ramshackle than incisively comic, a general air of blundering on, but genial. 'She'll be right,' to cite one of the idioms the Australian Language Research Centre was collecting. 'No worries, mate.' Sam disapproved of the existence of the Centre no less than he disapproved of the raffishness.

Dramatize, dramatize, intoned Henry James. And James was one of the approved. Too modern for the Oxford syllabus, James was someone I had read with the excitement of discovery outside the curriculum. Though not quite in the way Wallace Robson had reputedly read *The Ambassadors*, for relaxation during the evenings of his final exams. Now I was lecturing on *Portrait of a Lady*. Girls wept in the aisles. So I was told years later, anyway. Innocence, betrayal, retrospective jealousy, doom, heady themes for a twenty-two year old. But as for dramatizing, I cannot recall anything to dramatize, no suggestive arrangement of figures, no exquisitely loaded interchange. It is the same with felt life, another of the sacred terms of those times, their terms. Maybe it was one of Jock's terms, a touchstone for the novel. But the felt life eludes me. I cannot even be sure if the novel seminar was taught by Jock, Bill and me, all three of us together, or by just Jock and me or Bill and me at different times.

Bill Maidment was another of the inherited Sydney staff, the one I was told to keep an eye on. A Derridean *avant la lettre,* a premature post-structuralist, he would undermine every assumption with a 'But how do you know that?' He could, and would, reduce everything to first principles, like a deconstructionist watch-maker, and have all the fragments displayed there and then it was the end of the seminar, Time's up, and we would leave the bits all dismembered. He refused the claims of every individual method, proclaiming a faith of pluralism. At the time I found it brilliant. It broke down everything. As the years went on and everything still remained broken down, I began to be less enamoured. The espoused pluralism reduced every singular position to impotence. But that was years later. Bill was one of those academics who was shy of publication, though he actually did publish an article. One. It was 'A. G. Stephens and the *Gympie Miner* – Part 1' in *Southerly*. He complained bitterly that he had never intended a part 2 and that Gerry Wilkes had as editor added part 1 to the title just to embarrass him since it was never going to appear.

Pluralism was a Sydney tradition, a component of libertarianism. There had been a free-thought professor of Philosophy, John Anderson, who was now a myth for his challenging of all assumptions. Later his followers broke away and challenged Anderson. Do it, was their principle, don't just say it, do it. They translated free thought into free love, free sex, and met down the pub every night. When I first met Margaret Clancy she said, 'I wonder how long it will be before they get hold of you.'

'Who?' I asked.

'The Libertarians.'

Not long.

So it was the pub and parties after the pub closed and the heady conformities of anarchism. Looking back on it now it seems to have been a classic Cold War formation. Much like Derrideanism and deconstruction. It was against all authoritarianism, except its own unadmitted variety. The left it particularly denigrated. Pluralism was not so much a liberation – after all, you could only live one or two pluralist positions simultaneously – as a way of preventing any progressive positions from being established. As soon as put forward they would be deconstructed. I hung on determinedly to my left-wing beliefs, such as they were. But the libertarians and their pluralism certainly influenced me. Just as

the Leavisites influenced me. Both had their points. It was not until the escalation of the war in Vietnam and the opposition that it provoked that they both came to seem beside the point. Later still I began to understand that in Cold War politics they had both been very much to the point, from the view of society's controllers.

I was far from unsympathetic to much of the Leavisite position. After all, my tutor was reputed to be the only Leavisite at Oxford. He wasn't that exactly – not, that is, a paid-up follower. But he certainly accepted many of their assumptions, as did I, and to some degree still do.

They believed that literature mattered. In an environment of cynicism and facetiousness and materialism and worship of Mammon, that was not so common a belief. To someone committed to a life as a novelist and to making a living lecturing on literature until the novels might pay for themselves, a belief that literature mattered was no bad thing. Though it probably didn't help the novels to make a lot of money. The Leavisites took a strong moral line, and coming from a working class puritan tradition, so did I. They set themselves against the deadening tedium and time-serving of the older universities' way of life, and so had I. They believed in focussing on the detail of the text, the texture of the prose, and this concern with the minutiae of verbal expression and implication was again no bad thing for someone who was developing as a writer. The exclusion of larger social ideas that could become a consequence of this close focus was unfortunate to say the least, but that they shared with most of the other current academic methodologies. It took me years to work my way out of those constraints. And anyway there were some critics, gesturing towards these larger social and political concerns, who had had their early association with the Leavisites. In its early years *Scrutiny* had briefly been open to a more socially aware dimension. Insofar as by the 1950s and 1960s Leavisism had taken on a politically conformist, reactionary attitude it was no different from anything else on offer. Certainly there was nothing any different in literary studies at Sydney. These were the dull dog days of the Cold War, teetering on the edge of that ambiguous upheaval of the 1960s.

And the Leavisites were oppositional. So they presented themselves. That was an important attraction, in the absence of available political opposition. This oppositional stance continued at Sydney as Sam and his cohorts battled against received opinion and the English department he had taken on. He went about things in an oppositional way, even though he now was the professor, and professors in those days at Sydney were known as God professors. They had absolutist powers. And he used them.

It was this that provoked its own opposition. Not everyone there was as sympathetic to the Leavisite project as I was. I was one of Sam's imports. But many of them were sympathetic to the arrival of some new energy, to a critic of some international distinction, author of a couple of books on James Joyce, to the hope of a sense of direction and distinction for the department. Sam, however, had little time for those he had inherited. He dismissed them out of hand. Even if for the first year it might have looked as though he would tolerate them, it soon became clear as he imported me and John Wiltshire and Germaine Greer and the Tomlinsons, and then as time went on, Tim Kelly and Wilbur Sanders and

Andrew Deacon and Howard Jacobson and Peter Nichols, that he was intent on restocking, not rehabilitating.

And Leavisism in power was not the same as Leavisism in opposition. In opposition it had a dialectical, leavening effect on the system within which it operated. In power it became totalitarian. The phrases that once had the ring of challenge now had the leaden weight of rote learned ritual. The texture of the prose, the felt life and so on became first parodic, then tedious. A deadening conformity stretched ahead. Muted murmurs of resistance began faintly to be heard. It was not the Leavis line in itself that was objected to, but Sam's attempt to impose it as the sole line and allow nothing else. And even this seemed as much a matter of personalities as anything else – people he trusted, people he didn't trust, to teach this or that course. It was not that there were other lines standing in opposition. Most people would have been hard put to formulate anything markedly oppositional.

There was Jim Tulip, who had done his doctorate at Chicago, and talked of genres and myth criticism and a university run FM station there. And there was Geoffrey Little, who had contributed to the furnishings of the common room a series of framed prints of the University of Schweppesshire, mildly amusing vignettes of a quaint institution, Schweppes' tonic water in those days being a sort of English upper-crust or middle-class product, before it became a mass-market soft drinks brand. Geoffrey's area was the Romantics, and he had a cat called S. T. C.

'Ah,' you would say knowingly, 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge.'

'Neeow,' Geoffrey would say with delight. 'Stray Tom Cat,' and he would give a snort of satisfaction through his nostrils, a vibrant, buzzing noise that Stephen Knight used lovingly to imitate. Geoffrey had once worked as a gigolo in a Paris bar, his wife was wont to tell you. Perhaps he wasn't quite as much the straight-faced Englishman he presented himself to be. The University of Schweppesshire, anyway, made little appeal to my predominantly working-class experience, indeed, with my high moral seriousness, I found it rather crass. Sam's evaluation of it is unlikely to have been more charitable.

There were eventually noises about the historical approach. But that was not something that anybody ever practised. The dominant mode was a vague sort of new criticism, a system of exclusion, avoiding politics or history or religious belief or anything that might get you into conflict with the state or parents or the Catholic church.

It was Sam's authoritarian mode that provoked the opposition. And slowly an opposition was provoked. Some of us decided to produce a magazine. This was a confrontation of ideas. We would offer plurality against the single line of officialdom. We would express critical variety, and put in a few poems and short stories too: the creative aspect, so lacking in the purely critical agenda of Leavisdom. We would engage with the mass media, with articles on film and broadcasting. We would not be narrowly elitist. 'You must be very careful,' said Andrew Riemer, 'that some people do not use this as a way of getting academic articles for promotion published.' It seemed an unlikely idea that anybody would claim publication in something like this in the same way as they would something in *Essays in Criticism* or

Modern Language Review or the *Review of English Studies,* all those authoritative publications overseas. In those days the received wisdom was that if publication in a reputable overseas journal scored three points, publication in an Australian journal, few as there were, scored one. But he was probably right. He left it darkly mysterious who the some people might be. Anyway, he was one of our editorial board, he could see to that himself. Stephen Knight, John Wiltshire and Alec Jones were the others. It was called *Balcony* because the designer, Kevin Brooks, had a photograph of a wrought iron Paddington balcony he wanted to use, and since no one could think up a better title, we called it that. This was the era of the gentrification of Paddington, and a rediscovery and appreciation of the nineteenth-century terrace house.

In the course of writing this I went into the department and found the corridor was lined with tables bearing boxes of old journals. There were two large boxes of unsold copies of our magazine, *Balcony*. The CIA's cultural interventions, *Encounter* and *Quadrant,* were there in long runs. There were copies of *Index on Censorship, The Hudson Review* and various English teaching journals. There were even a few signed offprints of articles by Andrew himself on the subject of his doctorate, 'a boring playwright,' as he put it in one of his volumes of autobiography.

A sign said 'Free Books.' It was deeply depressing. Boxes of journals and books thrown out. No one thought to keep them as a departmental resources. There was still no departmental library. The books in the Muniment Room stored thirty years ago for a Waldock memorial library had long since been dispersed, and the library never instituted. Some of the journals were in bulk, like our magazine, found in a storeroom. Some were from the Adult Education library, subscribed to over the years. All were being thrown out. The days of intellectual debate through journals, the issues of those bitter wars, cultural, critical, political, that had been fought in print, all were now unvalued. Perhaps all the battles were now won; or lost. What was certainly lost was any sense of caring about books or journals, about culture or criticism or literature, about anything at all, really.

Yet by the end of the afternoon a good two thirds of the material had gone, scavenged by students and the occasional academic. Some individuals must still have cared; or at least been interested. Even if the institution and its management, as we now call it, no longer did.

Sam imported another Leavisite from Cambridge, Howard Jacobson, bearded, hairy, leather jacketed. People would point at him as he walked through the quadrangle, an alien, a freak, a portent of things to come. After graduating, or maybe while graduating, he had sold handbags in Cambridge market. We looked at Maggie's accessories with new interest. Later he wrote a comic novel about a Cambridge chap recruited by his tutor in the shower to work for a Cold War intelligence operation called Freedom Academy International and being posted to Australia to fight subversion and moral decadence in the universities and the media. I should have read it and been warned, but at that stage it was yet to be written, and his then claim to fame was for the savage comedy of his lectures to first year students on the decadence of James Joyce.

Had I looked more carefully at Geoffrey's University of Schweppesshire pictures round the common-room, rather than rejecting them out of hand, I might have noticed that the text was by Stephen Potter, who had himself lectured in English for a while before giving it away for comedy. Years later I read Potter's description of 'The Coming of the Lawrenceman.' It captured much of that strangely eroticised Leavisism that Howard Jacobson embodied, and that pervaded the department.

Howard came round one evening for dinner or drinks and we talked about Sam's growing totalitarianism.

'Isn't there any opposition?' he said. 'Hasn't anyone thought of doing anything? Like starting a magazine?'

We confronted bland shamelessness with bland shamelessness and told him nothing. The project was meant to be highly secret. In due course Jacobson launched his own response to *Balcony*, a load of old cock called *Chauntecleer* as Stephen Knight characterised it. Then Bill Maidment revived another journal *Pluralist*.

Fighting Sam with a critical journal was, of course, only part of the rationale for the magazine. It was what enabled it to get started. But I suspect a large part of the drive was my desire to edit a magazine. This was the time of literary magazines, the last of its time. Already the American universities were funding puffed up, pretentious quarterlies that imitated those seminal reviews of the beginning of the century. Already secret agencies were funding them. They were rapidly becoming sinister simulacra of the real thing. But they still survived, and we survived for six issues, drawing on international contributors – Wallace Robson, Christopher Ricks, D. J. Enright – alongside local critics and local poets and fiction writers – Frank Moorhouse, Rodney Hall, Charles Higham, Antigone Kefala, Bill Collins. I used to sell copies round the staff club. It was fun.

And it was not totally academic. The creative component was important. I had begun to meet other writers. The Leavisites were never too keen on contemporary writing. I think they rather thought that literature had all been written and nothing new should, or indeed could, be added, and what there was they disapproved of. But theirs was not the only game in town. In Worcester one university vacation, drinking in The Old Talbot where Samuel Johnson's father once held a book sale as in due course I recorded not only for *Berrow's Worcester Journal* but also *Notes & Queries*, a returned traveller had told me about the Royal George, the place to drink in Sydney. I ended up there and at the Newcastle and the Criterion soon enough. I spent a lot of time around those Push pubs. They still carried on the tradition of Sydney's bohemia of writers, journalists, academics and the rest. This was the world that provided me with the material for my early fiction; something the Leavisite battles, for all their time-consuming virulence and gossip and obsessions, never did.

One lunch time in the staff club bar I asked Gus Cross how I could get some reviewing. Part of Gus's disreputable image came from his reviewing for the press, along with some marital scandal and having played in a jazz band at Trinity College Dublin with the author of *The Gingerman*, J. P. Donleavy. At Gus's suggestion, I walked into *The Bulletin* office on Park Street and asked to see the

reviews editor, Charles Higham. It was an act of confidence, or stark insensibility, that I doubt I could manage now. I was a bit peeved that I was asked to write a trial review. I did it. It helped put me off Margaret Drabble's novels for years, having to write a review of her that was never published. Anyway, I passed the test and the books started to arrive: Norman Mailer, John le Carré, J. B. Priestley, Raymond Chandler, A. D. Hope, Doris Lessing, John Updike, Norman Podhoretz, John Cheever, Arthur Miller, John Osborne, B. S. Johnson, Julian Maclaren-Ross, George Steiner ... One of the first books I reviewed was Judah Waten's *Distant Land*. Judah, a well-known communist, was amazed to find an enthusiastic review in the right wing *Bulletin*, he told me years later, and included it in his application for a Commonwealth Literary Fund fellowship – which he was given.

Reviewing seemed the classic way to start a literary career. A way to join that debased 'metropolitan literary society' about which Leavis intoned. The Leavisites deeply disapproved of book reviewing, of course. Especially for the dailies and weeklies. Vincent Buckley, holding the Leavisite fort in Melbourne, told Higham he only reviewed for the quarterlies. Charles Higham, *The Bulletin's* literary editor, was pretty cynical about those metropolitan literary values, too. He was cynical about a lot of things. He told me how the library of the University of Texas had approached him for manuscripts of his poems. He didn't have any, so he set about copying out some from the printed texts, which he duly sent them.

Higham refused to let me sign the pieces Michael Wilding and insisted on R. M. Wilding. 'Otherwise people will think I've got the actor,' he said. He was more than half in love with Hollywood, and later went to live there and wrote biographies of Ava Gardner, Orson Welles, Errol Flynn and Marlene Dietrich, amongst others. So there I was, reviewing for *The Bulletin*. It gave that feeling of having a foothold on the ladder of literary ascent. As I put it in *Wildest Dreams*, 'it was the illusion of community, membership of the literary, the world-wide web of reading and writing and reviewing. An immaterial world of imaginings, of voices, of signs. I rarely met the reviews editor. Just the telephone conversations and the books with their little slips of copy paper and the scrawled deadline and word length. For years after these slips would flutter down to the floor as I opened one of those review books, the scribbled message bringing a brief flash of those times.'

The payment cheques had printed on them the phrase 'in payment for all copyrights' and required the contributor to sign an endorsement. This seemed outrageous even in those days.

'Nothing to do with us,' said the teller at the bank. 'Just cross it out.'

So I did. Nothing ever happened. But the attitude was typical, not just of Packer's *Bulletin*, but of Archibald's original. Henry Lawson's 'Pursuing Literature in Australia' is the best account of the economics of the glorious *Bulletin* years from a writer's point of view. It was all part of a tradition, it gave a sense of belonging, to write for this living legend.

I was so proud that I took out a subscription to *The Bulletin* for my parents. My father wrote back that he was sorry at all the muck I had to read. Ah well! His reaction to my first book of stories was much the same. I remember a line from one of Tony Harrison's poems in which his mother says to

him, 'And as for your poems, they're shit.'

It was Gus Cross who invited me to write for the new series of critical studies he was editing for Sydney University Press. He offered me free range of the corpus of English Literature, except for John Donne, on whom he was going to write. It looked like being a good series. Gus by now had taken up a chair at Newcastle and recruited a couple of his staff there to contribute; one was Norman Talbot, a poet with a poet's reputation, to write on Keats, and Clive Hart, an international Joycean who edited and published a scholarly fanzine, *A Wake Newslitter*, to write on *Ulysses*. I chose Milton's *Paradise Lost*. I had decided my first series of lectures needed replacing. In writing a new batch of lectures, I would be able to produce a first draft of what would be the book. The Leavisite position, following on from T. S. Eliot, was that Milton's language was vague and imprecise. Christopher Ricks had confronted and demolished this case in *Milton's Grand Style*. Despite some initial resistance and scepticism, I had been persuaded by Ricks' approach and on the basis of a series of close readings began to move on to a more political interpretation of the poem. The anti-militarism of Milton's version of the epic was immediately relevant to Australia's engagement in the war in Vietnam. It was a way into a larger enterprise that led into a rediscovery of Milton's radicalism.

Gus had alienated Sam Goldberg early on. Sam had spent days phoning Gus without getting an answer. When Gus finally surfaced he asked Sam what number he had been calling. 'Oh, that one,' he laughed. 'That's for my ex-wife to call.' He compounded matters at one of Sam's trial marking sessions. We all sat with photocopies of the same student paper, and gave our mark. It was an attempt to get consistent standards. Gus's result was way out, a seventeen when everyone else had given nines or tens. 'I was marking them on the train on the way in,' he explained. 'Must have gone through a tunnel at that point.'

Oxford summoned. I responded. I had hardly been any time away, the call still exercised its pull. There would be a time later when I ignored its call, but that would be ten years later. Now I responded. This was one of the things you went out into exile for, to await the call, wasn't it?

I don't know whether the murky circumstances were revealed from the beginning, or only when I was back in England. And even when revealed I did not realize how murky they were. It was a fellowship election. One of the candidates put forward, strongly backed, was a Leavisite, Morris Shapira. He was not just any old Leavisite, but one bearing the full thumb print and endorsement of the master; indeed he had taken over Leavis's teaching at Downing. I never knew to what degree I was invited as a candidate in my own right, or as someone who, from my current employment, could, with all too little prodding, reveal the full enormities of working within the Leavisite project. So that being flown back to England for an interview, which at that time seemed an extraordinary and expensive honour, was perhaps rather more an expensive and even dishonourable strategy to block the other candidate than a mark of anything much favoured about my own status.

That effectively tells the story, even before it is begun; begun in any scene set, dramatized, pictorial

way. The dreaming spires unportrayed. The Jamesian potential lost: the only Jamesian note being the aesthetic predilection of this other candidate, a figure of such developed Leavitical sensibility that he was all but unable to commit any cultural response to paper, except for once editing a selection of James's essays. But he seemed a pleasant enough person. Presented himself so, anyway. He proposed we should have dinner together, the night before the interview. Perhaps now, almost certainly now, I would decline such risky fraternization in such a fraught context. Not that now I should think of engaging in such an exercise. Perhaps his insistence was too strong; perhaps it was my determined openness to experience which I proclaimed at that time and something, when young, to which you tend to hold. All material for the novels, too. As it is, I can remember nothing of the experience, where we ate, whether it was after some official sherry party, if such occurred. All I remember was that when we returned to college, the gates were locked and he could not get back into his rooms.

Maybe it was a mark of his higher favour as a candidate that he was given a guest room in college. I had been lodged in an annex, some row of terraced housing near the college, to which I was given a key. Perhaps the room in the terrace was guest accommodation for married visitors, since it had two beds. In those days colleges were strictly single sex and women, I believe, not allowed to sleep in college.

I could do no other than offer him the second best bed. I suppose a more Machiavellian response would have been to insist that he woke up a porter and so presented himself from the very beginning as trouble. That, after all, was what I was there for, to present Leavisites as trouble, it emerged in my interview.

I had doubts, but offering him the bed did seem the only charitable thing to do. I had doubts since there were rumours about his sexual preferences. Hadn't John Wiltshire told me that he liked to conduct tutorials in his bath? Or perhaps it was from his bath. But he made no pass. I survived unscathed. Later he was bashed to death by some youth he had picked up. Peter Davison, by then having left Sydney and working with Shapira at Canterbury, was for a while the police's prime suspect, on the basis of a heated public argument he and Shapira had had over Shakespeare. Hamlet, revenge!

The scout who came to wake me expressed surprise at finding both beds occupied. I often wondered if that, reported, didn't influence the outcome. My interview, anyway, focussed almost entirely on how difficult and disruptive to the study of English Literature Leavisites could be. That hardly helped my case in any positive way.

As I stood at the station, leaving Oxford, I saw Wallace Robson on the platform opposite saying goodbye to Shapira, for whom, as well as for me, he had been a referee.

Neither of us was appointed.

Sam summoned me when I got back to Sydney. This might have been the time he looked up at the ceiling of his office and said, 'Six. The deputy vice-chancellor has twenty-four.'

I looked blank.

'Lights,' he said. He had been counting the fluorescent tubes.

It could have been a joke to put me at my ease. Or it could have been rampant, paranoid megalomania.

I had got permission to go away from Gerry Wilkes, the Professor of Australian Literature. Perhaps he had been head of department at that time; or Sam had been away in Melbourne. I had made a decision not to let Sam know. This had annoyed him.

'It was in vacation time,' I said. 'I didn't miss any teaching.'

'But I like to know these things,' he said.

I stayed silent at that.

'What if you'd got the job and I suddenly had to find a replacement?'

'I would have given the required six months notice,' I said. 'It wouldn't have been till October.'

Already I must have decided I had, or wanted, no future with Sam.

As God-professor Sam had absolute control over who taught what. This was not a great issue for me since, as I had not taught before, there were no favourite or familiar courses I was being removed from, no former privileges or rights or honours that I was losing. It was all new and I had no point of comparison. Similarly with the syllabus, I had not prepared classes or topics before on authors no longer allowed. I had no authors I specialized in only to find them excluded from the new canon. But these changes, these prescriptions and proscriptions, rankled with the staff who were there before Sam's appointment. And the uncompromising, tactless and totalitarian way in which he made his changes caused even more resentment.

Amazingly, I remember none of the detail. But gradually resentment led to something like opposition. There was no common cause uniting the opposition, except resentment of Sam. Nor was there much political nous or will. Some people simply left. Peter Davison went back to England with no secure job in line. Derrick Marsh was appointed to a chair at La Trobe, Peter Edwards to a chair at Queensland and Gus Cross to a chair at Newcastle, where he died not long afterwards. Thelma Herring went to New South Wales. On the language side, George Russell moved to Canberra, Arthur Delbridge and John Bernard to Macquarie. Some of these departures might have been expected in the course of career moves. But put together they gave the sense of the beginnings of an exodus. They also weakened the opposition to Sam, since these were the older and senior staff in the main.

In the end change came by splitting the department into two. Gerry Wilkes had the chair of Australian Literature. He investigated his contract, found as professor he had the right to offer courses. The plotting was all done back stage, presumably. I was privy to none of it. Gradually what was in mind was intimated, hinted. Bill Maidment was the only vocal opponent.

'Why does the solution have to be professorial? Why do we just change one God-professor for another? Why can't there be a departmental decision? A department board?'

I don't think Bill's questions were ever intended for a practical result. That was not his way. He deconstructed the prevailing, and deconstructed it well. But he was not offering to lead a non-

professorial movement. No one was. This was the problem. It was not a department that would take upon itself its own destiny. Ten years later it voted against having the right to vote for its own head of department. It accepted, all too readily as Bill correctly saw, a new professorial leader to replace a previous one. This was not the way of revolution.

In that regard, of course, it may have been the only way of change at that time. Sydney was a very hierarchical university. It was not like Oxford or Cambridge with the power in the faculty rather than in the professors, and with the colleges offering another power base outside the faculties and departments. It had a clear chain of command which it did not want challenged. Better split a department, massacre a subject, confuse the students, than question professorial power. Certainly Sam's professorial power was confronted by allowing the department to divide. He complained about this attack on his sovereignty. But it was divided between two sovereigns. There were no workers' councils, no revolutionary junta. In later years professorial power was reduced: but that was to strengthen the power of the vice-chancellor. The power of head of department became the new power, and the line of command from vice-chancellor through the deans – appointed now, no longer elected – to heads of departments was established as rigidly and hierarchically, as non-democratically and non-pluralistically, as ever the earlier God-professor structure had been: more inflexibly, probably.

The rumoured, the possible, the proposed split in the department generated a lot of buzzing. Much lunch time conversation, and none of it recalled. All that energy, all that engagement, all that projection of the self. For some it was a time of deep anxiety. I was still so young, so naive, so amazed to have a job that the prospect of its loss did not mean much, I could always look for another one. The appeal of the academic life had been in the possibilities of travel, of teaching round the globe. I had not come to Sydney to settle down, buy a house, raise a family. For those of my colleagues who had made those plans, the developing uncertainties were disturbing. I was on a three year contract. I could always go back to Oxford and write the thesis I had been admitted to do but never begun, or just go away and write novels, which was what I wanted to do. So anxiety was not the major issue for me that it must have been for other people.

Sam called a meeting. It was during a week Gerry was away in Tasmania. Suspicion was rife that in Gerry's absence Sam was planning a coup, or a pre-emptive strike, something sinister. Those in loose opposition to Sam held a prior meeting in the staff club, informally, in which it was agreed Sam was probably planning to ask us whether we would chose to work for him or for Gerry if the department were split. Since we did not know in any official, formal way that the department would split, since the implication of choosing one professor or the other in relation to our contracts was unclear, Sam's meeting seemed like a bad idea. For us, anyway. What if too many people opted for Gerry, would Sam take on the superfluous ones who had, nonetheless, rejected him, or would they be out of a job? I could see that this might apply to me.

But there was also a strong objection to Sam's calling the meeting at all. If there was to be a meeting,

then Gerry should be there too. If it was just a matter of staff expressing a preference, this should be done confidentially. Just as a matter of fair principle. We weren't sure why, but confidentiality seemed something that could usefully be preserved in this sort of issue. Sam's meeting smacked of face to face intimidation. So we all agreed to refuse to commit ourselves if Sam asked, on the grounds of the situation being unclear, of not knowing the full implications, of needing official notification of the nature of the split, and so on.

We assembled in Sam's room for the meeting. The six fluorescent tubes blazed away. After some obfuscating preliminaries he got down to business. He asked each staff member, one by one, who he or she planned to opt to work for. Sam or Gerry.

One by one they all nominated. Not just Sam's supporters, but our oppositional caucus. I cannot remember if they began by attempting to stand firm, refused to commit, but were worn down by Sam's insistence, or whether there was instant capitulation. Only two people refused to commit. Peter Edwards and myself. I even forget whether it came to him or me first. Whichever, it came back and forth to both of us, Sam's remorseless insistence that we made our choice clear. We refused. In refusing, of course, the choice was clear enough. We would not be opting for Sam. He certainly would not be taking us. But that was not the point of the exercise. It had been a co-ordinated attempt to stand firm. And it had failed.

There was a note in my pigeonhole from Sam asking me to see him.

'How're you today?' Gerry asked as I stood in the sandwich queue at lunch.

'I was fine till I had a summons from Sam,' I said.

'What about?' asked Gerry.

'He didn't say. I thought I might go and see him after lunch and get it over with.'

'No, don't do that,' said Gerry.

'No?'

'Go at the time he says.'

It seemed mysterious. I began to have forebodings.

'Take notes,' said Stephen.

'Take notes?'

'So you've got a record of what's said,' said Stephen.

'Won't that annoy him?' I asked.

Stephen gave his smile.

'Probably.'

Sam sat grimly behind his desk.

'I've been hearing reports of you,' he said.

'Oh yes.'

This didn't seem to get us very far, so I asked, 'What sort of reports?'

'I'm not prepared to say,' he said.

'Good reports ?' I hazarded.

'No,' he said.

'What am I supposed to have done?'

'I'm not prepared to say,' he said.

'Or not done?'

'Done,' he said.

'Who are the reports from?'

'I refuse to say.'

'What do they allege?'

'I am not prepared to say.'

The conversation rather bogged down.

Once in a while one of us would attempt to resume it and we would go round as before for a few turns until coming to a halt again. Eventually I remembered my notebook. I took it out and started to record the points of the conversation, meagre as they were.

'What are you doing?' he snapped.

'I'm making notes,' he said.

'I resent that,' said Sam.

I wrote it down.

'If I don't know what I'm supposed to have done how can I answer any charges?' I asked.

The interview probably took twenty minutes, but it never got further than that, Sam being darkly threatening about reports about me, my asking what I was alleged to have done, Sam saying he was not prepared to say, my complaining that being charged and convicted for unnamed actions contravened natural justice.

'I'm not charging you, I'm warning you.'

'What about?'

And round we went.

At the bar Gerry was drinking with Ralph Farrell, the chairman of the professorial board and Bill O'Neill, the deputy vice-chancellor. They asked me to repeat the conversation. Then they bought me a drink. Or maybe they bought me a drink first. In those days the university was small and informal enough for you actually to meet such power figures.

I heard later that Sam had gone to the vice-chancellor or the deputy v-c with a demand for my dismissal. But I was never officially told this. Nothing more was ever said. It remained there, a haunting, threatening episode, whose comic note only partially masked its less amusing aspects.

What I think I had done was speak injudiciously at a party, in the presence of some students and staff-members supporting Sam. It was the practice then, as it still is, to adjust examiners' marks after

they have come in. The marks that a marker gave were called raw marks. They received some cooking, either by comparing a student's spread of marks across other papers, or by reading through the scripts again. The Leavisites were particularly prone to seeing qualities in a student that didn't show up in the marks. They may have had a point. Papers would be re-read in the attempt to 'find a few more marks.' Sometimes to lose a few. One of my first tasks on arrival had been to re-mark a large batch of first year papers which had provoked the examiner to hysteria and a failure rate of over seventy-five per cent. A thirty per cent failure rate was as high as was deemed practical.

In the final honours year the adjustment related to what class a final result might end up as. Finding a couple of marks might ensure someone got a high distinction, a first, rather than ending up at the top of the credits, the upper seconds. It could be the difference between a first and a second, or an upper or lower second. It could affect the comparative ranking of students, and ranking could affect the chances of winning a post-graduate scholarship. These adjustments always take place and always seem slightly suspect. The faculty now requires a specific ration of firsts, seconds and thirds, imposing a Bell curve on every course. This requires a no less suspect manipulation of the raw marks, indeed a slightly worse one. But it is official policy. Sam was doing nothing illegal. But he was touchy about it.

I never knew who dobbed me in, though I harboured various dark suspicions. Thirty three years later it all, or some of it, came back to me when I read Howard Jacobson's novel, *Redback*. A character called Frank Whiling, educated at Oxford and an English grammar school near the Malvern Hills, is encountered drinking at a Sydney Push pub, not unlike the Newcastle where I used to drink with Frank Moorhouse. Characterised as 'an inactive activist, a sort of soporific socialist who quarrelled with his own bedclothes,' he complains to Jacobson's first-person narrator about Professor Rosenfeldt's being 'not what you might call dispassionate when it comes to marking examinations and awarding prizes.'

I had been attempting to develop a more political criticism, a criticism that took into account the political and social context of literary works, and the political ideas debated within them. It was a way of escape from the deadening constraints of the dominant mode of literary studies, whether of Leavis, the New Critics or the conservative literary historians. Lecturing on Swift, I developed a reading of *Gulliver's Travels* that interpreted the relationship between the Houhyhnhnms and the Yahoos as one of colonizer and colonized. I gave a paper on this theme at a conference in Canberra. There was a strong resistance to political readings at that time. Donald Greene, an American doyen of Dean Swift studies, was particularly hostile. At the conference dinner a lecturer in English from Melbourne, Evan Jones, came up to me, established who I was, and pushed a paper plate into my face and ground it round a bit, saying something about my being 'that clever young man from Oxford,' or maybe 'England.' It was unclear whether the hostility arose because he was Welsh and I was English, or he was from Melbourne and I was from Sydney, or if it was a matter of literary value and he was a Leavisite, or a matter of politics and he was of the right, or that he wrote poems and I wrote prose. Or all those things combined. Later George Russell came up. He had left his chair of early English literature at Sydney and gone to the

Australian National University in Canberra.

'Get away,' he said. 'Get out of that Sydney department. There's evil there. It destroys everything.'

The department divided into two courses. A and B they were called, with all the rich heritage of the language of Shakespeare that both sides of the split commanded. I joined Wilkes' course. The only one of Sam's recruits to defect. At the end of the year I took up the return ticket to England that my contract provided. I planned to go and live in Greece and write a novel but the Colonels took over. Running out of money, I found a job at Birmingham University. It was another unhappy, divided department. I stuck it for five terms. Sam was back in Melbourne and the Tomlinsons with him. And as Henry James put it in one of those novels I used to teach then, things would never be again as they were.

The Midlands

Slate

At infants' school I learned to write with a slate and chalk. The slate was set in a wooden frame. The frame was about an inch or so thick and its outer size was about the size of the A4 paper I am writing on now. But I am not confident in that memory. Perhaps it seemed a large sheet to a five year old child, but in truth was smaller. I am not even sure that I hadn't already learned to write at home, with pencil on scraps of paper. With my father's commitment to literacy, with my mother's hope for getting ahead, wouldn't they already have taught me to write? Weren't there any legends of my early aptitude for words and writing and print? Didn't I already read and write before going to school? My birthday was in the first month of the year, but the school year began in August or September, so wouldn't they have enrolled me at the beginning of the school year? Everyone was so eager to get ahead, to ensure their children escaped the trap of manual labour, that my father was in, or petty clerkdom that ensnared the parents of the other children I grew up with, and if you could get ahead by a few months, if you could be in advance of your years, that was considered a step on the way, that gave you an edge on the system.

The firm materiality of slate and frame and chalk dissolve into alternatives and ambiguities, possibilities and doubts. Uncertainties divide into proliferating choices. But there was a slate and there was chalk and there was me and there were words. Though what the words were I began with, I have no recollection. In the beginning was the word. But the word, presumably once revealed, is not reiterated. Are the rest of the writing and erasing, the wiping the slate clean and the fresh start, the turning over the new leaf, are these just the endless attempt to rediscover that first fully formed inscription, the primal unremembered word? Or are the origins unimportant, no single word significant in itself, the continuing succession of words alone of concern?

Even the schoolroom I can barely remember. I sense high windows, dark surrounds. The outside I remember, because for years later I continued to pass it by. I remember the name of that first teacher, Miss Granger, but nothing to individuate her. Nor do I remember whether her name was spelled Granger or Grainger. So much for the written word. And as for her, I remember her only as an example of a type, the spinster infants' teacher, riding her ancient black bicycle, the rear wheel covered over at its first quarter by some sort of mud shield, her hat similarly covered by some veil like material that ran over its top and down its sides, securing it against the winds as she rode by. Or is this not Miss Granger specifically but a memory of the type of schoolmistress who even then was a vanishing category, with their dark clothes, their swathed hats, their upright backs, cycling through the streets of the city and the country villages, unmarried, alone yet saluted by the generations they had taught, the boys dutifully raising cap or hat, cycling by on those ancient high bicycles in their seventies and eighties with that confident authority of a life in

command, oblivious to the lorries and cars that increased in number and size and speed year by year, always clad it seemed in dark blue or black, slim, dark, upright figures whose faces I cannot recall, only the image of their generic type?

The infant school was not in the school proper but in the Institute building, about a quarter of a mile away, so you were at school yet not really at school. It was the first of those recurrent states of not fully belonging. Or perhaps this was the archetype on which I imprinted, projecting not fully belonging onto every situation that succeeded. It was a late-Victorian red-brick building, across the road from the church, which was a fifteenth-century building of the local sandstone, grey with age but with a soft red glow sometimes showing through. The church was at a crossroads, the Institute building opposite on one corner, a farmer's red brick Georgian house opposite on another corner, and nothing, a field, diagonally opposite. One Sunday morning the farmer stormed down the aisle in the middle of the service asking what silly bugger had gone and bloody well blocked his drive. It seemed to me a splendid episode but my parents were appalled at it. And this anyway must have been years later, when private cars were common and lined the roads around the church on Sunday morning and evening. When I first went to the infant school, just after the end of the war, cars were few and petrol was rationed.

And then next to the church, indeed we always described it as in the churchyard, was the Mug Inn, an old half-timbered black-and-white pub. It was adjacent to the churchyard rather than actually in it, but if the graveyard had been a strictly symmetrical square, then the Mug would have occupied a corner of it.

That was the village. Claines. Except for the cowman's cottage next to the cowsheds down the road, there were no other houses. I still don't know why. As I write this I am amazed at how little we knew and how little we asked. This was how it was and this was the context in which I grew up, it had always been like that as far as I ever knew, why would you ask if it had been any other, how could you even imagine that it might have been any other? Though we must at some time have speculated. Sometimes you read of villages in which the black death had raged and killed all the inhabitants, or maybe nearly all the inhabitants, and the survivors had built their houses afresh on a new site: but the church, being stone, had stayed where it was while the old wattle and daub and timber cottages had fallen down and vanished. Was that what had happened here?

But then, where was the new village? There were encroachments from the city reaching towards the church, further down the lanes, 1930s houses that had crept towards it. But there was no village. Was this a case where all the inhabitants had died? Or was it because in this reach of the West Midlands people were not that communal. Rather than huddling close together for a shared existence of mutual co-operation and protection, did they spread out away from each other as much as they could? Cottages were dotted around beside the narrow roads, in the corners of fields, sometimes individually, sometimes in a row of two or three. Was this a sort of heath land

where people could keep their distance, suspicious, unfriendly?

Or was it that the church was some outpost of the cathedral, some institutional construct serving not the needs of any parishioners but some bureaucratic folly, a living for a cathedral canon, a consumption of the surplus exacted in tithes? I don't know and I have nothing on hand to tell me. I lived there happily not knowing, not knowing there was anything to know or not know, not suspended in uncertainties but unenquiring, sitting in the seat on the back of my mother's bicycle as she pedalled me to school, later walking along the tracks and lanes with or without others, squabbling and allying, friends and enemies, Stanley Sharp eating from a dollop or horse shit in the road between the church and the farmer's house, sixty years ago, the horse shit still shines and gleams, the tombs above the ground are cracked open, there are no cars, just us schoolchildren, and Stanley Sharp eating horse shit and nauseating us all for a lifetime.

It was a village school without a village, but we didn't live in the village, anyway, the village that wasn't there. We lived a couple of miles from the church in a row of houses on the northern edge of the city, fields back and front of us. If we looked across the road to the south there were no houses opposite us, only one side of the road had been built on, and across in front of us were fields sloping down to a stream, and on the other side of the stream was a small wooded hill, an old orchard. And at the top of that hill you could just see the roofs of the edge of the city. And behind us were more fields, stretching out into the country. Now, of course, all those fields are covered with houses as the city has spread out; but then we were this strange anomalous suburban street amidst the fields and orchards.

And we were in the county. The city boundary of Worcester was somewhere at the further edge of the field to the south. This was something we stressed. It was a separation from the city. A distinction. We made it into a superiority. In England every distinction is made into a superiority or inferiority, every difference into a class separation.

So it was that I went to the village school, because we lived in the county and were under the administration of the county education authority. But that was a choice of my parents. Other children in that same avenue went to one of the city schools, which could be reached by bus.

The city school, St Stephen's, was one my father had gone to as a child. It might have been expected I would have gone there. But my father was not a traditionalist. It was no doubt my mother who insisted on the village school, it was no doubt my mother who insisted that we lived in the county. She had been brought up in the country. Her father had been head groom to a brewing lord. A brewing lord you might think had made his ill-gotten gains from exploiting the urban proletariat, but he would have gained his title by paying his dues to the conservative party and the county had the values of conservatism to which my mother attached herself. The city was always potentially working class and socialist, the country was county and conservative.

So there we were, just across the boundary, safely in the county, the larks soaring up from the

fields behind, pouring out their full hearts in unpremeditated verse just as that revolutionary son of the ruling class had described them. So there we were, on the edge of the city but not of it, technically in the county, barely part of the countryside, but more part of it than part of the urban world.

Marginalized it would be called now. And indeed we were, almost, marginalized. This was the West Midlands, on the edge of the Marches, that border region that divided England from Wales, that no-man's-land of dispute, that interface between the Normans and the Welsh, between the invaders and the defeated. But the Marches were strictly speaking a bit further west, this was the margin of the marches, the border of the borderland, the second degree of peripherality. Just half a mile away was the River Severn, which must at many stages have marked the border, until the invading Romans and Angles and Saxons and Danes and Normans had successively gathered their energies and pushed on further west. A forgotten frontier. And all those bright young confident upper-class English writers passed us by without a glance on their journeys to a border somewhere else.

The relics remained. In the cathedral there was a show-case with the skin of two Danish tax-gatherers, flayed alive by the local populace in 1042. It is no longer on display, distasteful perhaps to modern susceptibilities. But it was there when I was a child. I found it pretty distasteful too, dusty, curled, thick, grey fragments of parchment.

I remember a bonfire in the avenue for the end of the war, but whether it was the end of the war in Europe or the later end of the war in the Pacific, I don't remember. I think people put potatoes in the hot ashes of the fire, where they baked, and we ate them. Or was that at some bonfire night later? We always called it bonfire night rather than Guy Fawkes' night, recognizing that it was the immemorial bonfire we burned each year; burning Guy Fawkes in effigy was a political manipulation, a later renaming, of the fire for winter. We still made guys nonetheless, and burned them. And we hollowed out sugar beet and put candles in them and cut out mouths and noses and eyes, and the candle shone through. We didn't have pumpkins, they were not indigenous. Nor, no doubt, were the sugar beet, but they were growing them in the Midlands and they fell off the lorries that took them up to the sugar factory in Kidderminster and we collected them from the gutters of the main road and brought them home to feed the hens and to make bonfire night lanterns.

But this is getting ahead from the bonfire at the end of the war, if that is what I remember. I suppose it was victory we celebrated. Forty years later I was invited to a Victory over Fascism celebration at the East German embassy in Sydney. I didn't go. In those late cold war days it didn't seem a wise invitation to accept: and the celebration was by then clearly appearing premature. But in 1945 or 1946 people seemed to believe it. Other memories of the war I don't have. I am told that once I ran across the main road in front of a convoy of tanks, but I have no memory of that.

Was it an early anti-war gesture? Excitement at technology? Or downright stupidity?

Brief images emerging from the darkness, rare illuminations from the oblivion. One I remember was of my father being at home off work. Sometimes he had bad burns at the foundry. The front door bell rang, which was always formal. People we knew knocked at the back door. Did I answer it or my father? Again, I don't remember, but I hovered there, as the boss of the foundry spoke to my father, either visiting out of decency to see how he was, or checking up. What I remember was the way my father called him Sir. It seared itself on my memory, scorched an inerasable imprint. My father was not a servile man. He was fiercely independent. And to me he was often a terrifying figure of authority. And here he was calling his employer Sir, in his own house. I could not comprehend it. It seemed all wrong. Even in those distant 1940s, when the old forms still held, when social divisions were still rigidly demarked and enforced, it seemed all wrong. Or seemed so to me, who knew nothing of them. Where had I been in my previous incarnation? What ideal memory of social justice had I brought with me? What wrong had I done to be brought here where no such justice ruled?

They stood at the front door, the boss not coming in, the almond tree behind him, flowering pink if it was Spring, bare if it was winter, I do not know, this is not a visual image, two silhouettes against the southern light, no features, no faces, nothing but light and dark, and the remembered word, the way he had to call him Sir, that verbal encapsulation of the way that world was, that monosyllabic summation of the power of ownership and capital, authority and class.

Back with words again, oral, not chalked onto slate, but words nonetheless, and words at last specified, with a content no longer deferred. This is what it was all to be about, class and capital and power, authority and acceptance, defiance or submission, defeat or escape.

No doubt the purely personal psychologist could interpret this as the child's first perception that his father is not absolute authority. No doubt such a revelation has its shock. But it was the vision of the social order encapsulated there that remained with me. That a grown man had to Sir another man. This was something we had to do in school but even then in school we believed that that was only school, once we were grown up we would not have to touch our caps to masters and say Sir.

I cannot remember at the infant school and primary school how we addressed the teacher. As Miss Granger, Mr Mitchell, Mr Creswell, Mrs Passey, I think. I think it may have been only at the Grammar School that the Sir-ing was enforced. And enforced it was in earnest. So there we were, taught the feudal form of obedience demanded by our invading oppressor, the Norman French *Sieur* imposed on us Angles and Saxons, who had imposed their own terms on us when we were Celts, who in turn had imposed their terms on us when we were nameless indigenes, terms we no longer knew.

It was not only spinster schoolmistresses in black who rode bicycles. Bicycles were the basic means of transport. Petrol was still rationed after the war: private cars were comparatively few.

Was this because they had not been manufactured during the war, or because the 1930s world of class privilege still persisted?

I would sit on a seat behind my mother or father, and as they struggled up hills, puffing for breath, I would empathise with them, puffing too, 'Oh that's a steep one, oh that's hard.'

So they said, anyway. This is not one of those illuminated moments. I don't think I was doing it consciously to amuse them. I think I was a natural empathist. I could empathise with all labour, all suffering. Was this the writer's mode, empathise rather than experience? Or an innate laziness? And how do you tell the two apart, are they indeed distinguishable or separable?

There were horses, too. The fields back and front of the house were ploughed with horses, two great hulking plough horses. The bread was delivered in a bread van drawn by a horse. The milk was delivered in a milk cart drawn by a horse. Horse breath steaming white in the frosty mornings. Horse droppings glowing golden brown on the road outside, rapidly shovelled into a bucket and piled round the rhubarb, or added to the compost heap. There were conventions about this. You only took the horse droppings that had dropped outside your own house, unless your neighbour was not a gardener and did not collect them, in which case you were entitled to theirs. You did not poach the droppings from outside some other rhubarb grower's house. Unless, of course, unless they had been sitting there for hours, and you, as a mere child, were incited to go and get them quick, too short to be seen above the front fence, scuttling up with a shovel.

Later years it was out on a bicycle, Dad and I both with buckets hanging from the handlebars, shovels clanging loose inside, as we went across to Perdiswell, the old wartime airfield where sheep grazed. And we would scrape up the sheep droppings and fill the buckets and cycle home with the buckets swinging dangerously from the handlebars, oh spare me, spare me, that I do not see anyone from school, boy or master, spare me that no gazed on from afar schoolgirl from one of the girls' schools sees me, may a cloud of invisibility surround me as we make our torturous way, may there be no sudden need to stop, no swerves, no coincidences of turning front wheel and swinging bucket to unseat me and bring me to the ground, showered in sheep shit.

Maybe the first time it was an adventure, that childish joy in collaboration with an adult. But soon joy surrendered to resentment, a surly glowering rage. Why was this being done to me? Slave labour, brutal exploitation, was that it? Or was it worse, public humiliation, a deliberate degradation, designed to bring me down from my scholarly heights, my destiny for a privileged world, designed to remind me of the base realities of shit and labour, to expose me through the streets to the gaze of the entire community, was this some calculated punishment, some cruel castigation, was it my father's revenge, resentment against my easy life of scholarship while he toiled away in the foundry, resentment of my clean clothes and uncalloused hands while he laboured in soot and dirt and smoke, blistered and burned, all to support a privileged me? Did we really need these buckets of sheep shit, were they so necessary to our survival? They probably were, we grew pretty well all our own vegetables and we fed them compost and manure, chemical

fertilizers we used only sparingly.

I seethed and fumed. Later again I wrote a story about it. A story in which two elegant, privileged, middle-class girls out riding their horses are followed by this sinister menacing figure on a bicycle with a bucket clanking from the handlebars. They fear murder, rape, so distant are they from the details of rhubarb growing, their lily-white hands unsoiled by soil, ignorant of the realities of generation. This was when the horses had vanished from the shafts of the plough and bread van and milk cart. This was in the fifties when prosperity and progress seemed to be announcing themselves, and horses were no longer the beasts of burden of the poor farmer and small dairyman, but the mounts of Venus, the steeds of these rich young ladies from private schools, the unattainable, the unapproachable, mounted above us in class and accent and status and wealth and saddles. And the pursuing cyclist was of course myself, without clanging bucket, cycling sadly, hopefully, desperately round the country lanes, hoping for a glimpse of these Boadiceas.

That I could write this as comedy, or attempt to write it, for I was never able to finish it, was a mark of some rueful acceptance. By then I think we owned a car and I no longer had to experience these shit gathering forays. We would put the bucket and shovel in the boot, just in case, if we were driving through country lanes. And as for the mounted Venuses, I ruefully accepted their inaccessibility, turning them into figures of mockery rather than objects of desire, the resort of the writer. If you cannot obtain, replace empathy with mockery.

The village school was up the hill from the infants' school and the church. Dog roses grew on the bank and each side of the road stretched fields, hidden by hawthorn and quickset hedges. There was no village beside the school any more than beside the Institute building and the church: just the schoolmaster's house, a row of two or three cottages, and further along again the vicarage. And all around fields, with in the distance dotted the occasional cottage and the Grange.

I remember little more of the school than I remember of the infants' school. I was there only a couple of years, I suppose, before I was siphoned off to better things. But if you weren't siphoned off, to the Grammar school or the King's school, you stayed on till you were fourteen or fifteen. It was all in process of change and the scheme of separating children into grammar schools and secondary modern schools at the age of eleven was being put in place. But when I went to the village school it still catered for the fourteen and fifteen year olds. I think. I think so because I remember an incident in the playground one day when the older brother of a boy in my class had a fight with one of the teachers. The teacher had punished the younger brother, so the older brother came up to him, fists raised. The only image I have is of them squaring up to each other, young bespectacled Mr Mitchell, and this great hulking country lad. Again, just a momentary image, a brief illumination, with the beginning, the end, the result, the consequences missing.

We were all sorts there. The slow, the quick, the dim-witted. Those who could never make out

their letters or numbers, running thick fingers along the line, faces screwed up in agonized attempts at concentration. We laboriously learned ounces, pounds, stones, hundredweights and their confusing abbreviations, ozs., lbs., cwts, all now obsolete.

‘What are these, then?’ asked Billy Pugh, confronted by an arithmetic problem with something in dozs. ‘Dounces?’

Some became farm labourers, some became farmers, inheriting their fathers' farms. There were traditional country labouring families of ten or eleven children, wearing the ragged hand-me-downs of their older siblings. And there were the modern suburban families of the planned two. And occasionally there were the gypsies, children who came for a while as their roaming parents settled down for the pea picking or fruit picking, the seasonal work they came back to each year, before heading off again. I could sing the praises of this easy integration, before streaming and intelligence tests and the other social separations in the name of education were imposed. But I do not remember it. It would be good to think of it working well, and I certainly don't remember it not working well. But I was only there those two or three years before being streamed off.

The pump. I remember the pump in the schoolyard, because I ran to it carrying a jam jar to be washed out for a painting class and I slipped and cut deep into my hand. But whether I was treated as a cosseted, suffering injured victim or a stupid, careless idiot I cannot recall.

I remember music, all drums and tambourines and flutes and cacophony and the headmaster coming in and saying, 'My, I thought it was the Salvation Army band passing by.' And I remember the doubt, did he really believe that, or was he just saying it? First suspicions of the credibility of authority.

And that's about it.

My mother, or was it one of the teachers, suggested I should take the examination for the prep department of the grammar school. 'Do they have longer holidays?' I asked. The appeal of higher education even then when I was seven. Longer holidays.

So no more walks to school through the country lanes, along the alley besides the Cooks' hen run, and the pig run, past Harry Allard's, the rat catcher's, through the winding street with a handful of ancient, tumbling down thatched cottages where the white haired witch lived, or you could avoid that little settlement, Cornmeadow it was called, and follow the track between the back of the houses on one side and the corn field on the other. We used to pluck the heads off wheat as we passed and chew it and I got one husk stuck in my tonsils and had to go down to the hospital to have it extricated. That's about the last memory. The hawthorn hedges with their young leaves called bread and cheese, but they never tasted like bread and cheese to me. I don't even know how often I walked this or how often my mother cycled with me on the back of her bicycle.

Open fields and narrow lanes of childhood, dark yew trees round the church, lichen covered gravestones and fearful old cracking open tombs. And then the red clay banks of the hill and the dog roses and the playground. Not even there in dreams any more.

My father was an ironmoulder, like his father and his grandfather before him. It was a skilled trade and in the early years of the century the moulders used to go to work in top hats, he told me. I found a photograph of the moulders all lined up, proud, strong, severe looking men in a large photograph to hang on the wall. It was lying in the garage. This was years after I had left home, back visiting. It was mildewed and damp stained and the images were partly erased because of being left in the garage. It was something my mother would never have had hanging in the house. To her it was a dirty job, nothing at all to be proud of, and however much craft and skill it involved it was a workingman's job. Her dreams, her aspirations were of something higher in the scale of things, and to her it was a scale of value.

I don't know if she had always hated his job, even when they married, or had hoped that things might change. But they didn't change. How could they? I don't know whether it was the literal dirt, the material soot and sand, or the social evaluation of the job that she hated, or even whether she recognised any distinction of categories.

Each night Dad would cycle home from work in his old trilby hat, his dirty old raincoat, his soot stained trousers and jacket and heavy boots, and wash in the kitchen, sitting on the kitchen chair, change into the clothes he wore round the house, and hang the work clothes in the garage. Again was it the actual smell of smoke and soot and sweat and iron that was banished from the house, or was there a symbolic, a phobic reaction?

My mother was determined I shouldn't end up in a job like that. My father, too, he had no wish for me to follow him. The foundry was something I only ever saw once, when he had left his lunch sandwiches at home and I was sent into take them to him. I remember only a dark, cavernous building. Cranes, girders, darkness, men begrimed with soot, and the roaring flames of the furnaces. One brief second of illumination for the fifty years he worked there.

He complained to me once it was not even a trade he could put to use in civilian life. That was the phrase he used, civilian life. Did he see it as a forced conscription? It was not like being a builder or a carpenter or a plumber or an electrician or a mechanic who could fix up things around the house. He had no skills at all in those areas. It was a specialized trade about which we knew nothing, this banished hell hole of fire and soot, this Satanic stigma of proletarianism. Out beyond the edge of the city, amidst the fields, with the early morning lark, and the thrush singing on the gable in the evening, they could escape it.

If my mother resented the foundry for the dirt and social stigma of manual labour, no less did my father resent it from a feeling of injustice. He had been a clever student at his primary school but when the time came for the scholarship examinations to the grammar school he was sick with flu and could not take them. It was the only sickness in his brief childhood.

For years he kept some watercolour paintings of birds, preserved in the pages of the books he had won as school prizes. They were a delicate side of him I hardly perceived as a child. I saw the

strong and severe side, physically strong, strong in a way I could never be, and often it seemed to me clumsy, brutalized by the demands of hard physical labour. But these bright evocations of bullfinches and bluetits, folded away in the pages of a book, yet nonetheless preserved, told a different, if undeveloped, story.

So he left school at twelve, while his brother and sisters went on to a life of education. His brother went to university and became a clergyman. His elder sister, too, went to university and became a teacher. And the younger sister went to teacher's training college and became a teacher too. Dad was the one who had had to leave school and go out to work and help support them all. It must have deeply rankled.

It was this injustice, the dramatic injustice of it, that I was always conscious of. And it must have pervaded my own consciousness with a guilt, the displaced guilt of his brother and sisters, and who was to say they didn't feel it deeply enough too? But there was always this sense, as I went through grammar school and university, that I had been so privileged while he had been so denied. That as much as anything must have shaped my own political commitments, commitments that bizarrely brought me into endless confrontation with my father, whose situation had, in my interpretation, inspired them.

'People asked me, why didn't you change your job?' My father told me, more than once. 'But it wasn't that simple. I was glad just to have a job. There were millions out of work.'

That was the reality of it. Or one reality. Clearly people did change jobs. But clearly millions were unemployed through the 1920s and 1930s. Those were not radical times, not in the West Midlands. It was a deeply conservative environment, cautious, slow, wary, even defeatist.

Later, in the 1950s, he used to go to Workers' Educational Association classes. He went to classes in philosophy, would read classical philosophy texts at night and at weekends. His tutor, who was a canon at the cathedral, Canon Armstrong, wanted him to go to Ruskin, the workers' educational college at Oxford.

But how could he up and leave a young family? How could he support himself and us? And for what? What opportunities would have been open for him then, in his forties and fifties? It was an unrealized, unrealizable dream. Again, it must have rankled.

And anyway he had made another decision years earlier. Somewhere he had read about the stock market. He began to invest. How he did it I don't know. He told me once how he found the name of a broker, but I cannot remember the details nor whether it was in the twenties or thirties. He was living at home all this time, and once his brothers and sisters had left home and were working he was saving money. He began systematically to invest it. At one level it was a way out of the trap of poverty, the ever present threat of unemployment, the cycles of short time work, men laid off. It was an insurance. But it was also an alternative life. It was another world in which he could live, the abstractions of financial statements and dividends, percentages and yields, away

from the foundry which he felt brutalized his intellect and spirit. He began to take the *Financial Times* and immerse himself in the daily movement of the market, reading it through his breaks at work, poring over it at night. It was something behind which to retreat, to regroup his forces, to prepare his assault on the hostile world. At night he would listen to the radio stock market report after the evening news. For those brief minutes we had to be silent. Nothing else had that demand.

The share transaction slips became the scrap paper on which I would draw and write and scribble. We never had drawing books or blocks of new paper. These were still times of austerity; and anyway, the habits of economy and making do would have prohibited them. So I would use these mysterious documents, blank on the one side. They had stamps on them too, inland revenue stamps. I was endlessly agonised, could I put them in my stamp collection or not? They were stamps but not postage stamps. They were exotic and mysterious, but not the real thing.

These agonies of definition were only a dim shadowing of the divisions within my father. Cycling home begrimed from work he was one of the troop of the despised working class, the horny-handed, the blue-collared. It was a term he hated, blue-collar. Was he not allowed to wear a white collar? What did he wear to church, then? Was he eternally to be defined by a work shirt. Nor did the phrase the common people appeal to him either. I once had G. D. H. Coles' radical history in the house, *The Common People*. Dad was vociferously unimpressed by the title.

But behind the pink pages of the *Financial Times* he was the capitalist, the investor, the business analyst. And he was making money. It meant that in industrial disputes his instincts were divided. At elections he did not vote Labour. And by the time he had resolved these tensions, then I had developed my own first socialist flutterings, and was arguing against his participating in the share market, propping up the structure of capitalism, living off the labour of others, who at the same time laboured for others so hard himself.

I write 'by the time he had resolved these tensions' but that is only my speculation. Maybe there were no tensions. He certainly had no time for trades unions. The union organizers were men no good at the job themselves, he would always say. Again, I argued back. Later, of course, as the union I still belong to sold out its members consistently, I began to feel he was probably right. Now things are less clearly divided, now many of the ostensible workers' friends of the unions and Labor parties can be seen to have played dubious roles and worked for the interests of the employer. But that is another position again, which I don't think was my father's.

Contradictory, though, it all certainly was. And if he had no time for unions, nor did he have any time for aristocrats, monarchy and all the idle rich. He didn't waste time thinking about the monarchy, but would come out with mildly republican sentiments when pressed, to my mother's annoyance. And when she would speak supportively of the aristocracy, he would say, 'That's not what your father used to say, he had no time for their carryings on, sitting out freezing on a carriage in Park Lane till three in the morning while they were all gambling inside.'

'He never said any such thing,' my mother would say.

'He did to me,' said Dad.

On the Edge of the Country

Though my father worked in the foundry in town, he was still very much the countryman. In some ways he was closer than my mother to the country. She had grown up on country estates, moving from place to place, from Lincolnshire to Yorkshire to Staffordshire to Worcestershire, and had never been that integrated with the life of the land. Her father had been a head groom. He looked after the horses that rode across the meadows, hunted over the fields. They had not been into sowing and planting, reaping and harvesting. Though not an urban alienation, it had nonetheless been an alienation from the detailed daily life of the country folk rooted in the soil.

But my father, when he was taken out of school at twelve, went to work on his grandfather's smallholding. Grandfather Haffner, who died before I was born, had a small market garden. We were on the edge of the great market garden region of the Vale of Evesham which supplied so much of the produce for England. A dozen or so miles away, once again as with everything on the edge of the named and known region yet not part of it. But where we were was still a fertile market gardening region. Grandfather Haffner may have come down in the world. I cannot now be sure if it was the Haffners, my father's mother's family, or the Wildings, who had lost their rightful land to the lawyers. Maybe both families. It is a common enough story in many families, and no less true for that. Even Cromwell was never able to subdue the lawyers.

Grandfather Haffner reputedly never drank water, it wasn't safe to drink, only cider. He also made corn bread from the corn meal he used to feed to his pigs. Indian corn in England at that time was only used as animal feed. My father used to recall how delicious that corn bread was.

But there is something puzzling here. It was Grandfather Wilding who had lived in America and knew the uses of maize. He had run away from home after his mother had got the village schoolmaster to beat him for some transgression. After he had left school, so he was particularly indignant. He somehow got work on an ocean-going vessel, and jumped ship in America – where he met a girl from the next village in England, and married her. But after he had seen the troops fire on the striking workers at the Carnegie ironworks in Pittsburgh, he decided America was no place for him, this wasn’t quite the land of the free, and returned to England. Surely it would be he or his wife who made corn bread? Or had the families co-operated on this, Grandfather Haffner providing the corn meal from the sack of pig feed, Grandmother Wilding providing the recipe or the expertise? I do not know, and no one is left alive to tell me.

My father spent a year working on the smallholding before going into the foundry. I assume it is from this time he learned his gardening skills but again I do not know for sure. But gardening was one of his major activities, filling the weekends and often the long summer evenings. Not the gardening of flowers and shrubs, for which he had little time. But the production of vegetables.

We produced almost all our own vegetables. In winter we might buy a sack of potatoes from a farm, but basically we grew everything that we ate, potatoes, parsnips, beetroot, swedes, carrots, peas, broad beans, kidney beans, Brussels sprouts, purple sprouting, leeks, onions, apples, plums, raspberries, loganberries, gooseberries, redcurrants, rhubarb, thyme, mint, parsley.

It was a continual occupation. I hated it. Maybe at first I enjoyed it, helping in a useless, childish way. But by the time I was old enough to contribute usefully, I began to see it as a forced labour. I wanted to be away doing other things. Reading a book. Off playing. Anything but this. Digging alongside my father, being told how to do it, not taking too big forkfuls that I couldn't lift, nor too small that made no impression, tossing the soil over so a trench was dug, taking out by hand the bindweed, the long white roots of convolvulus that choked the plants, breaking down the clods of soil with the tines of the fork, but not breaking them down into the trench and filling it, making sure the grass and weeds dug up were turned over and buried by the clods of soil so they didn't carry on growing, filling the trench with compost, the mass of rotted vegetable peelings and horse and sheep droppings, then covering the filled trench with the soil dug from the next row, leaving a new trench for more compost, hands getting dirtier, nails getting filled with soil as I grovelled after the bindweed, worms accidentally chopped in two, the wind or the drizzle chilling or dampening me, sweat making me hot, how many years of this did I go through, ten or a dozen I suppose, fuming generally, did I spend my whole childhood in fuming and resentment, sometimes when I look back on it it seems so.

And then there was putting up the bean poles, arranging them at an angle so that the poles of one row sloped towards the poles of the next row, and were secured along the top of the length of a row by another pole or poles laid horizontally. If it is hard to describe it simply and clearly in writing, it was no more easy to do it in practice, get the poles at the right inclination, and tie them with twine at the tops. And it was always old scraps of string and twine, never a new ball of it, everything was save and scrimp and economize, waste not want not, and the scraps of string were always too short for me to secure the poles, or they broke, or I did something else wrong, maybe broke a bean pole pushing it into the ground, pushing too hard when it met some resistance and it snapped, and then we were running short of bean poles because we always recycled them from the previous year and the year before that, or supplemented them from some unsuitable slender wavering stick found in a hedgerow or somewhere, so the row looked ramshackle, ill-matched poles, insecurely tied, the top pole undulating and escalating and diving, instead of neat and firm and parallel to the earth.

Or the pea sticks, here we used sticks cut out of hedges or bushes, not trimmed straight poles but sticks bushing out in all directions, and they had to be pushed into the ground near the young pea plants just coming out of the soil, not too far away so that the tendrils could not reach them to hold onto and climb up, nor too close so that they impaled the root and killed the young plant, and you had to watch what you were doing, not trample the peas by mistake, or indeed trample the

ground down too hard at all.

Or potatoes, mounding up the potatoes when they had grown a few inches out of the ground, mounding up the soil in long furrows that nearly covered the new shoots, but careful not to cover them entirely and choke them, and keeping a straight line so the mounds were straight and the furrows between them were straight, all this came naturally to my father, or so it seemed to me, he just wielded the spade and knew intuitively how deep to thrust it in, how much soil to mound up. But for me, learning it, it was just one more thing to get wrong.

And the weeding, endless weeding between the rows of plants, and you had to concentrate, you could not just grab and tug, you had to make sure you didn't pull out the seedlings by mistake, or pull out the seedlings when you pulled out a weed that brought them out with it in a big clump of soil, and you had to know the tougher plants like thistles or dandelions that would snap off if you weren't careful, leaving their root in the ground which would sprout again the next week, or next day it seemed, these tougher plants you had to ease out more carefully, or use a small fork or trowel if you didn't have the natural skill, oh hell of weekends in the muddy soil, and weeding was best done after rain when the weeds had sprung up again and could easily be removed from the softened earth.

And the joys of harvest, what joys indeed, home after school, run down and pick some beans, and having to make sure you didn't get beans too small that would have grown bigger, and make sure you didn't miss full grown beans that if left a few more days would grow tough and coarse and inedible and would be discovered next time somebody went picking, 'Here, look at these you missed,' you would be rebuked for not paying attention, for not concentrating, for day-dreaming, when all you'd wanted to do was pick the wretched things and get back to your book.

Or the gooseberries, whose bushes were thick with thorns and scratched and tore at your hands till they were scuffed and scarred with white lines and began to bleed, and again don't pick the too small ones, don't miss the ones turning from green to a deep purple, low thorny bushes you had to bend down to pick from, and when you'd picked them you had to sit out in a deckchair on the lawn topping and tailing them, pinching off the stalk at one end and the dried remains of the flower at the other. Goosegogs, we called them, hardly ever gooseberries which sounded effete, guzgogs.

Blackberries, also with their quota of thorns, and black purple juice that stained your clothes if you dropped a ripe berry on them, or ripped your clothes if you got caught up in the brambles, which inevitably you did as you pressed in trying to grasp a spray of large, ready ripe berries. At least you could eat blackberries as you picked them, gooseberries were usually too sour and beans no fun at all. Though peas were tasty. But blackberries you could certainly eat, and plums too.

When I say that we grew all our own fruit and vegetables it is, of course, not quite true. There was also the scavenging. I like to think now that this was part of our unbroken heritage of country folk, well, of folk in general. The terms as so often in English, that richest of all languages, are not there. You cannot talk of peasantry in England because that basic characteristic of the peasant, the

possession of land, has been taken away from the people that would have been peasants. Was it ever there as substantially as in France or Greece? Landless peasants is hardly a convenient term, though it has the elegant irony of cancelling the land, the *pays* of the *paysan* that is the term's very definition. But to drag myself back from words to things, from abstract things to living people and land, living off the land was a way of life that my parents still clung to, whatever the specific alienations of their own families' circumstances. And living off the land involved not only your own land that you cultivated but also other land you passed by and over. Of course it might be objected that this connexion with the land is a romantic mystification, that the true reason for scavenging was that we were poor. But being poor is no disqualification for having a tradition of connexion with the land. Being poor is perhaps a better definition of our undefined nature than being called creatures of the land without land.

The avenue itself was our closest scavenging. When it came off the main road as we called it, the avenue cut through orchards front and back for the first half of its length. And a single row of trees had been fenced off from the orchard and marked as clearly in the avenue's territory: houses on one side of the unsurfaced road, and a stretch of grass with these trees on it on the other. These were deemed common property. Some trees that grew directly opposite a house were deemed the territory of that householder if it happened to be a householder who picked the plums. But many of the householders didn't pick them, either through laziness or infirmity or age or distaste or superiority or who knew what, so their trees were deemed to be common property. And each year we harvested these yellow plums for pie on Sunday, for stewed plums without pastry through the week, and for bottling and for jam to see us through the winter.

We were sent out to pick these plums for the family. But picking them you were out of sight. You could eat as many as you liked, unlike being in the garden. And we, the children in the avenue, gorged ourselves on them, local yellow egg plums, green when unripe, a flowery yellow when over ripe, beautiful in between, and we ate and ate them through the early summer and came out in huge hives of allergic reaction. Heat lumps, they were called, the hives. But it was the plums, not the heat, that caused them. You couldn't gorge yourself on the produce of the garden, you were sent to pick it and bring it to the kitchen for pudding or bottling. But down the avenue out of sight of your parents the plum trees offered their tempting yield and greedily we engorged without restraint, harvest wasn't that bad, not all of it, not out of the garden of torture, off the family plantation, escaped from the prison farm.

The row of trees ended half way up the avenue. There were no trees in front of our house. Instead there was a huge blackberry bush, which we deemed ours but others in the avenue deemed it common property. No matter, it was huge and prolific and this again provided fruit for Sunday lunch's pudding, and through the week, and for bottling and for jam. The blackberries were always eaten with apple, being held to be too strong to eat on their own. So it was always blackberry and apple pie, blackberry and apple jam.

Sometimes, when neighbours or marauders from further afield had picked the bush clean, we had to go further afield ourselves. There were lanes in the country rich with blackberries and we would walk, or go on our bicycles and pick away at these. My father knew where these bushes were. They were the site of his own childhood walks and foraging and so we repeated these same expeditions. And he knew, too, where the mushrooms grew, fields beside the River Severn and its tributary the Salwarpe, meadows where he and his family had been finding mushrooms and blackberries for half a century. And so we marked the season, early summer for the plums, late summer for the blackberries and mushrooms. And there were even pear trees in hedgerows out in the country that he knew of, small hard pears which I think we stewed.

As for the elderberries, only once in a while did we pick them. They were so strong, they needed mixing with some other fruit. Maybe once in a rare while we tried cooking them with apples, but even that I am not sure of. And the sloes, the deep, dark bitter sloe of the hedgerows, we no longer used them either.

The old Indian Secret Service major collected a bag of sloes once for one of our neighbours.

'Here,' he said, 'I've brought you these, perfect for sloe gin, just buy a bottle of gin and put them in and there you are.'

'Better he'd bought me a bottle of gin,' she said. 'I could've got the sloes meself.'

Next time he passed by he produced a bag of humbugs from his pocket.

'Have some hashish,' he offered.

And then there was firewood, which endlessly we collected on our walks, you always came back from a walk with a stick or two, which maybe you disguised as an improvised staff, some walking aid or other, and then broke up for firewood as soon as you got home. Leaves, even. I remember going out to the green where the huge chestnut trees cast a great cool shade in summer, and filling up bag upon bag of fallen Autumnal brown and golden leaves, for leaf mulch for the garden.

There was the pleasure of getting something for free, that was always one of the delights. Bypassing the world of trade and commerce, the ugly cash world of wealth and poverty, as much as any mystical connexion with nature's rich bounty. It was residual, of course, only a relic of a larger garnering we had lost contact with. I would read about people going nutting, but we never gathered nuts, we knew of no nut trees, except the horse chestnuts we used for games of conkers. But nuts, no, we had lost that connexion. And apart from field mushrooms, we tried no other fungi, but then the English never seem to have done. Natural water cress, we never found it. There were all these other things in middle-class children's books that I read of, but that seemed to belong to another fantasy world. Our own gathering was a depleted remnant of some richer past, supplemented mind you with modern developments like sugar beet fallen from lorries which we picked up from the roads for the hens. But depleted as it was, it still had the connexions. Now the blackberries rot on the bushes as the cars sweep past the lanes, laden with frozen deserts from

Marks and Spencer's and Sainsbury's and Tesco's and all the other emporia of alien, deracinated international financiers.

We didn't go gathering nuts but we did have the almond tree. This was in the front garden, by the front door. The back garden was where we grew the vegetables, the front garden was flowers. There was a lawn front and back and between the lawn at the back and the vegetable garden was a bed of flowers. Vegetables were not put on display. No one would have dreamed of planting vegetables in the front garden. Or did one or two eccentrics once do that? It was held to be a breach of the basic codes. Yet didn't we try growing tomatoes in the front? When tomatoes were still comparatively exotic in England? Or did I imagine that? I must have imagined it. The front garden was for show, for flowers.

Again, when I say that vegetables were not put on display, that too needs qualifying. When visitors came they were often taken down the back and shown the vegetables. Uncle Jack, especially: and when we visited him he took us round his vegetable patches. Ritually. Though being a minister in the low or dissenting church it was one of the few rituals he allowed. Along with eating meat on Friday to mark his refusal of papist superstition. And neighbours from up the avenue, if they came down they would do a survey of the vegetables, either taken down the garden or doing their own reconnaissance. There was a competitiveness here, not just in the 'Who can grow the biggest vegetable marrow?' category, but a more serious, overall assessment, seeing the crops in the ground, what sort of yield, what sort of condition, what failures and depredations.

But though vegetables had their own access to display, they were nonetheless kept down the back. There were discriminations here, class divisions, caste lines. Everything had its proper place in England of the 1940s and 1950s. These were the immovable social codes. Fruit trees, too. We had apple trees and plum trees in the back garden but you would never dream of having fruit producing trees in the front. The front was for ornament, for display, the facade. The back, out of sight of the road, for production.

The almond tree was different, though. Nuts were not a staple of our diet. You heard of walnuts but they took centuries to grow and were planted for future generations: which meant hereditary estates, so walnuts were something that belonged to the landed gentry, no point in planting them. Chestnuts, too, again we read of chestnuts, but only rarely do I remember their being bought and roasted in front of the fire. Christmas, perhaps, once in a while. Again they were eccentric. This was not London or Ljubljana where roasted chestnuts were sold on the pavements. They were again a thing of the landed estates rather than a staple food.

Was it having grown up on those landed estates that inspired my mother to plant the almond tree? Did it have some social cachet? Is that why it was put in the front garden? Or was it an exotica? Years later in Greece I picked almonds from the tree in the garden; on the Greek islands almonds were as much a staple as the olives and pears. Had my mother, who never left the British

isles, seen the almond as some image of other worlds, other worlds she claimed never to want to visit?

It had a blossom, of course, a beautiful, delicate, joyful, pink blossom and perhaps that allowed its privileged place by the front door, flowering each Spring. But it also produced its almonds and each autumn we gathered them and cracked them open on the front step or the hearth and ate them there and then. And the pleasure of food production from an area designated for flowers alone, that surely added to the pleasure of the taste, that warmed our scavenging hearts without a doubt.

When I look at photographs of the house, taken when my parents first moved into it and I was an infant, it seems so bare. It was newly built, the garden was flat, a few plants in a flat space. But what I remember of it are the trees and bushes. The lilac by the front fence, the almond by the front door, the apple tree at the back of the garage, the other apple tree half way down the garden, the yellow plum tree, the greengage tree, and the various hedges of privet and the scattered shrubs, daphne and quince and cotoneaster. My mother hated things bare. The almond tree was clearly part of her strategy of planting cover. She liked thickness, density, clutter; she endlessly planted bushes and shrubs. This was less apparent to me when I was young, but years later, and by then they had moved further into the country, near the school and the church, she was ceaselessly planting, silver birch and fir trees, a grapefruit that never fruited, grown from a pip, all sorts of shrubs and bushes in unlikely and even inappropriate places, a riot of random trees and bushes and flowers that unless trimmed back would and nearly did immerse the house with a living fretwork of leaf and flower and twig. At the same time, with her Gemini nature, she insisted the hedges be cut and trimmed, hedges which always seemed to me best left to grow for privacy. But hedges had to be trimmed just as front gardens were for flowers. There was an order of things, social and divine inextricably interlocked, and this required hedges, like hair, to be trimmed and spruce. Oh battles to come in the sixties.

My mother was deeply conservative. My father had come from a working-class questioning milieu, in many ways challenging and radical, and had taken his own radical questioning further to become a firm believer in capitalism. My mother's views were much less intellectualized, they were an almost instinctive conservatism, an acceptance of the social order as it was. According to my father she was even more conservative when he met her. Gradually she changed and by the end of her life had developed a suspicious, sardonic scepticism about the political worlds. But for most of my childhood she represented the immovable Toryism of the ruling class. Not that she imagined any identification with it. Imbued with a sense of social hierarchy, one of her frequent phrases was, 'That's not for the likes of us.' At the same time she wanted better things for her children, wanted us to escape from the lower rungs of the social order. So at the same time there was a pressure for betterment and a defeatist conviction that such betterment was not for the likes of us.

It was not the same as my father's defeatism. His favourite line from the Bible was *Ecclesiastes'* 'Vanity of vanity, all is vanity.' He intoned it with a happy satisfaction. My mother rejected that cosmic despair. Hers was a cosmic Toryism, The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate. What to me seemed tragic in that vision to her represented an immutable order.

And whereas my father could all too readily sink into a gloomy contemplation of the vanity of things, my mother had a sense of fun, a love of music and dance and jokes. The piano stool was full of sheet music, popular songs of the 1920s and 1930s like 'Bye Bye, Blackbird,' 'Home James, and Don't Spare the Horses,' 'South of the Border, Down Mexico Way,' 'Roll Out, the Barrel' and so on. My father's family had been severe self-improvers, seekers of the truth through sect to sect, one time Plymouth Brethren, another time Seventh Day Adventist. His elder sister converted to Roman Catholicism and wanted to become a nun, but the family stopped her. His brother became a Congregational Minister.

My mother's life had been a different world: village dances, family music. Her younger brother played in an amateur dance band, her cousin, or was it her cousin's wife, played in a professional, all women, dance band, Ivy Gibson's, and the cousin's son became an actor – David Griffin, Emmett in *Keeping Up Appearances* was one of his roles. It was a modern world of popular song and laughter. With her and my father it was as if cavalier and roundhead coexisted in the same family.

For a while she had worked in a solicitor's office. She still remembered some of the skills acquired there. How to scratch a word off a sheet of paper, scratching the ink with a pin or needle so no trace was left and then writing over it: or opening a sealed envelope by putting a pencil in at the gap by the fold and then carefully rolling it down so the flap came unstuck. The solicitor who taught the tricks was good at them. But he did them too often and went to gaol. She always told the story with more amusement than disapproval, a tone unthinkable for my father.

Later she had worked with a local organizer for the blind, drove this blind lady all round the county. How had she learned to drive? I thought of her as a pillar of conservatism yet here she was driving a car in the 1930s, how many women of her class were doing that? Had her younger brother taught her? Had she gone and taken lessons? Only as I write this does its unusualness register. She was this strange paradox of the traditional and the new, my access to the song and music which were viewed with innate suspicion by my father's background, this entry into the modern world of motor vehicles, of speed, which again was viewed with deep scepticism by my father.

Of these distant momentary illuminations, one other I can date towards the end of my third year. It is a blue memory, being in my mother's bed, the quilt blue, the sky blue through the windows, a blue cushioned cane chair; and my mother telling me I was going to have a baby sister.

That is all I remember. Maybe it was brother or sister, and I have adjusted the memory to the

specific of sister. All I remember is the blue bed, the blue sky, and on the horizon through the windows the Malvern hills, some fifteen miles away. The other day my sister wrote to me, she'd been going through some family papers she'd souvenired, and found that the house used to be called 'The Beacon,' did I remember? I'd forgotten that too, but I remember the strip of wood on the gate with the metal letters spelling out the name, 'The Beacon,' after the Worcestershire Beacon it looked across to, the highest of the hills. The Worcestershire Beacon, the Herefordshire Beacon, and British Camp, the fortified one, the ditches and terraces of some forgotten military stronghold still clear on it.

Maybe I was looking through the window at The Beacon, fixing my less that delighted consciousness on this distant landmark. I can only speculate, I do not remember. But whenever I speculate, that is always what I speculate. Less than satisfaction. From now on I would no longer have my lone pre-eminence. From now on I would have to compete for attention. But I think I concealed my dissatisfaction. At least no family tradition tells any discreditable story. Not like when my mother was born and her sister, Aunt Gladys, said 'Drown it.'

As for 'The Beacon,' I can't imagine my parents ever named the house that. They were not the sort of people who would have named a house. That would seem too pretentious, too drawing attention to yourself. Presumably it was a relic from whoever had lived in it before. When the gate fell apart I remember the strip of wood with the name being kept somewhere in the garage. Nothing was ever thrown out. But it wasn't attached to the new gate. And yet according to my sister they must have used the name at first, it is on the address given on the wedding invitation. At some point it must have been used with a sort of pride, grandiose as it was; and then allowed to fade away into disuse. But the Worcestershire Beacon and the Herefordshire Beacon and British Camp remained there, familiar and friendly landmarks, embedded in the memory.

After twenty-seven houses the avenue stopped at a field. Sometimes the field was cultivated, more often it wasn't. The fields front and back were always cultivated, but this one often lay untouched, reverting to long grass. A footpath continued the avenue past it and met up with a lane which wound round past a couple of big houses, on past a handful of recent intrusions, and then dropped down to Bevere Green.

People who didn't know would pronounce it to rhyme with De Vere, that archetype of pretension and affectation. But it rhymed with every, and derived its name from the beavers that once inhabited that reach of the Severn. Bevere was a magic spot, a deep green enclave of high, leafy horse chestnut trees. It wasn't a common. Later, strands of wire were used to keep in the sheep that occasionally grazed on it. But in those early years there was no wire, just this open, grassed ground with its high trees and calm and silence. There were two or three country houses around it. One of them, subdivided into flats by this time, had belonged to Nash, the eighteenth century historian of Worcestershire, and is engraved on the title page of the second volume of his

history. But these houses were remote enough not to intrude. So here we came on childhood walks, gathering firewood, collecting conkers, picnicking. The squirrels would race up and down the trees, the rooks would caw away in the topmost branches and we would sit in the dappled green shade. That was all. I remember no incidents, no dramas, no tragedies, no games, nothing except the place, its cool and stillness and calm.

From Bevere you could get to the river. There were two walks, one through the farmyard that was at one corner of the green, and then along various uncertain tracks alongside meadows and over stiles and ditches. Or you could follow a narrow road between old brick walls, the walls of two of the grandiose houses, one of them a displaced persons hostel and auxiliary fire service garage during and after the war, the other Nash's former mansion. Murder alley, Dad always called it, though I knew of no murders there. But it was long and narrow and enclosed by these high walls. At the end of which was another field and a steep path down to the river.

Bevere was perhaps the focus of our outings when my sister and I were too small to walk. It could be reached by pram or push-chair. But once we could walk any distance, it was the river we generally went to. And that is what I remember, the Severn, that long, leisurely, muddy familiar Severn, 'silver Severn' as Milton strangely called it, low in summer, shrunk down in its banks, but always running, always dependable from its source somewhere in Wales, Plynlimmon was it, somewhere we all knew of yet never visited, the source we were prepared to take on trust. And in winter in flood, risen up level with the banks and above them, flooding all the fields, surrounding cottages, flooding the city streets beside it, huge splendid floods with tree trunks swept down, we would walk to see it. And still in dreams I go along that river, its summer swimming, its winter floods, seeing in dream strange reaches I do not remember, versions of stretches I knew, interpretations of passages I never reached to, speculations of stretches round a corner, beyond a bend, or where the path ran away from the water's edge and the detail was unknown.

Weekend after weekend we would walk down by the river, following the track down and then cutting back through short cuts in which we got entangled in barbed wire or Dad leapt a ditch and landed in it, or in which we had to creep past danger spots of potentially hostile farmers, tracks that maybe Dad remembered from his childhood but that had now been closed off, or short cuts that deductively should have led us back to the lane and a quicker way home, but didn't.

Keeping to the river bank was easy enough. Remains of the old tow track were still there, from when horse-drawn barges ran up and down it. They were no longer and the track had fallen into disrepair and trees and bushes now grew up on the river's edge. But there were still motorized barges, tankers carrying petrol that bore up and down the waterway with a great bow wave. Now they have gone and the river has changed. The steady wash they created swept the banks, washed away the mud, and preserved sandy beaches that we used to swim from. Once the barges ceased to run the beaches silted up, clogged up with mud, became unappealing quagmires.

But all through my childhood the barges ran and swept the beaches clean. There were

swimming spots all along the river. The Slip was the popular one, near the edge of the city, this was where my father had swum as a child, where we went on a Saturday morning. Heading north out of town, further away, were quieter ones, where we would have a family picnic, just us and a beach to ourselves, or maybe one other family. And out of town, a couple of miles' cycle ride, was the Horse-boat, named after a horse-boat no longer there, but one that had been beached and which had served as a swimming pool for youngsters half a century earlier.

And so I learned to swim, terrified, terrified, making my frog like swimming motions, supported in the water by my father, as he would slowly, gradually, drop his arms and leave me supporting myself, swimming, till I realized what had happened, became conscious, panicked, sank. In the end I managed it, in the end I swam across the river, that was a mark of success, the first time I ever did that, terrified, what if I sank half way across, and the other side, deep water, no gentle slope, how would I know when to touch bottom, what if I stopped swimming and tried to touch bottom too soon and went under, and what if I was too exhausted to swim back, what if I couldn't make the return, what if a barge came by while I was swimming back and I couldn't get out of the way, what if I got run down, what if, what if?

The joys of the river, the terrors of family life, the need to achieve something, at least swim, even if I can't catch a ball, or hit a ball with a bat, even if I'm terrified of climbing trees and hopeless at playing cricket, can I at least swim, can I at least do something, idyllic summers in the silver Severn, disregarding the claims that poliomyelitis was caught from the river, swimming where people had swum for centuries, or at least one century, did they swim before, when the river was a source of lampreys, did they risk have lampreys clamp on to them, when lampreys were so common in the river that there was a law passed that apprentices were not to be fed on them more than, what was it, five times a week, once a week, a law passed anyway.

And before that, when it was inhabited by the beavers, did they swim there then when beavers haunted the streams till they were hunted out of existence by the monks who ate them on a Friday, arguing with monkish deviousness that they counted as a fish?

Now there are no more lampreys and no more beavers, and the red squirrels of Bevere have been driven out by the grey ones introduced from north America, and not too many people swim in the Severn any more as it reverts to its muddy, sedgy banks, its quiet mysterious ways, flooded meadows, strange barges, secret channels revealed in my dreams and forgotten by the morning.

Midlanders

But were there no other characters? Was it all a desolate wasteland with me in the centre, or on the margins, me, me only, and not another human figure on hand? Is this how it was, was this the landscape of romantic isolation, monomaniac despair, monarch of all I surveyed? Or is it a product of memory? Or a function of writing it unplanned, unthought, unrehearsed? The sort of literary critics I was to read at university, some ten years later, would insist on the dramatized moment. Or enaction by character, not authorial narration. I believed all that, we all believed all that, but now its unnaturalness, its laboured artificiality is what most strikes me about it. Of course it works, all those enacted scenes. But whether it works in the interest of truth is more doubtful. Certainly I am unable to remember many enacted scenes: and those that are briefly illuminated as I search through the past are rather tableaux than theatrical episodes; they are silent vignettes, the lounge room, Aunt Gladys sitting straight-backed, Dad growling, or already left in dudgeon for the living room, Mum maybe collecting up cups, or sewing, me and my sister presumably there but doing what, me probably playing with the Dinky toys I acquired, model cars or better still model aircraft, vroom vroom, ready for take off, vroom vroom. Not the most Jamesian of dialogue, not even sure whether it's dialogue or narrative, but it's the best I can recall. Vroom, vroom vroom, up and away.

Of the figures in the landscape of my childhood, the old ladies are the first that come to mind. What a noxious breed they were to me, what figures of tyranny and nuisance and intrusion, what power and authority they wielded, what a misery they could make my life. The old men I remember less well. Maybe they didn't go out much. Maybe they had all died. Many, anyway, of these troublesome old women were spinsters and never had men on hand.

'No wonder they never married,' Dad would say, 'no one would ever put up with them.'

Of course they were the superfluous women of that first world war gender cleansing, in which twenty million were slaughtered, mostly men. And so they were left partnerless, the enduring mass victims of that senseless carnage, the lonely, single old ladies who lingered on with their frustrations and resentments and unfulfilments.

There was Miss Burden who lived up the avenue with her widowed sister and had a habit of calling in in the evening, ‘Yoo-hoo,’ and barging into the kitchen, just as my father was washing himself there, washing off the soot from the foundry, this was England, before showers; or worse, she would arrive just as he was eating his evening meal, we children banished from pestering him, his time of recuperation from the irritation and exhaustion of the foundry, we would have had our tea and be doing our homework, so Dad could eat in peace, and there she would be; or worst of all she would arrive just as the stock market report was on the radio, 'Cooee,' that cheerful chirpy cooee at the back door, no knock, already in, 'Anyone home? It's only me,' and in she would barge, and some crucial financial

movement would be lost.

'Damn and blast,' my father would swear, invoking some never fulfilled sulphurous removal of her.

It wasn't that that oppressed me, though. That was the oppression my father suffered. But for me it was the endless little tasks she had lined up for me, like mowing her lawn, or digging her garden, or trimming her raspberry canes. Little ways of earning pocket money. I didn't want the pocket money. Even then I had a disdain for mere financial transactions, especially such badly paid ones. It wasn't a cash transaction. It was duty. Go and cut Miss Burden's lawn. Miss Evans was another one, who lived with her brother nearby, she had been a nurse on an Australian troop-ship in World War I and now was another autocratic tyrant. She too had lawns to mow. And they both of them being mean and penny-pinching and unwilling to get them cut regularly, always left it till the grass was long so I would have to struggle with their stiff, old antiquated, unmaintained mowers, hand-mowers these were, thrusting these useless machines into grass too long to mow, scuffing the blunt unsharpened blade into the thick grass, digging up the turf, massacring the lawn, the grass damp because of its length, too long to dry out, and so not cutting properly, how I hated it all, my hands blistering, my time wasted, when I could have been reading some adventure, shooting down the enemy with Capt W. E. Johns or Percy J. F. Westerman, machine-gunning Huns and savages and villains and evil old spinsters. Is that why when I mowed a lawn in later years, usually left too late and grown too long, the grass lank and damp, the push mower skidding and sticking, the blade gouging out furrows of mud out of the surface of the soil, is that why unfocussed images of mayhem and massacre would seethe through my consciousness, is that why when I tear the weeds out from amongst the flowers or vegetables a sense of terrible vengeance on hateful enemies would rise up, though their faces now are from the immediate world of literary or academic servility and corruption, the old ladies long ago laid to rest?

Or there was Miss Pellow, whom my mother had driven round the county, organizing fund-raising for the blind. Miss Pellow was another torment, how could you be rude about a blind lady, Michael, so there I was, assigned to sell poppies for the blind with her at the cinema, standing there with a tray of wares and a tin can, subjected to the rejection and refusals and humiliations of the cinema-goers, what if someone from the school saw me, worse what if one of the masters saw me, what degradation, what indignity, and even being allowed in free to watch the film afterwards was no compensation, I remember none of the films.

But worse to come, Miss Pellow lived near the grammar school, in an apartment in some huge old house. These old regency houses are now prized and valued: then they were, to my vision, decaying and dilapidated, carved up into bed-sitters, a strange and alien mode of living with shared staircases and strange people, another world from our detached privacy out between the fields. Since she lived just across the road from the school she had the bright idea of my having my midday meal with her once a week. Perhaps it was my mother's bright idea, wanting to have a break from my coming home midday every day. School meals I had tried and refused.

But Miss Pellow's meals were a torture. I felt uneasy in this dark, over-draped room, this seedy

environment, and the different food. Again, I don't remember how different. Anything different would have been different in those days. I don't remember how long I endured the torment. Two weeks, three weeks? All I remember is the caterpillar crawling over the lettuce leaf that I nearly ate, how many had I eaten without noticing, how could a blind woman prepare a salad and wash the lettuce? This was before the mass chemicalization of our food. Now there are never caterpillars on the lettuce, never grubs in the peas, never maggots in the plums, now everything is saturated with insecticides and preservatives, in California is it twenty-three separate sprays on every crop, the Mexican women working in the fields miscarrying with regularity, their children born deformed from the chemicals. So perhaps I should look back with relief at those years when food was not toxic, perhaps I should be grateful at these foundations of whatever health I have now. But at the time it was trauma, horror, what could I do, what could I say, how much of the lettuce had it crawled over, was it a slug, in fact, not a caterpillar, I do not know, all I know is that it was something, something that proved too much, so that I begged never to have lunch at Miss Pellow's again, and was spared.

But the caterpillar or the slug was only the catalyst. The real horror was this world of old ladies, clad in black or blue or blue with white spots, the dark drapes, the pervasive smell of camphor, the dusty powdery clothes and complexions, the stale biscuits in ancient tins, and the bossy, bullying, tyrannical mode they all adopted, endlessly directing you, endlessly censorious, endlessly judgemental, eternally intrusive, nosy, inquisitive, prying and gossipy, they represented a large part of the oppressiveness of that society that oppressed us, embodied its values in an immediate way so that they came to seem to represent it. Indeed, later, by the time of Mrs Thatcher, they did come to represent it, she was it absolutely. But by then I'd fled that world.

Our neighbour on one side was a man called Fessey and we didn't speak to him. He would dig silently in his garden and we would dig silently in ours, exchanging not a word. Sometimes he would call across to the neighbour on our other side, 'Morning, Mr Beck,' as a taunt, or so we took it. Such neighbourly feuds were not uncommon in the avenue. Or anywhere else for that matter.

The objection was that he was an evil-living man. He was a declared communist and he had had a number of wives, or rather a number of women, who were not legal wives. How many I forget. Just one would have been enough. He shared the house with his sister. Later he married again and another wife, or alleged wife, moved in.

To my father's puritanical background and to my mother's fierce conservatism, Fessey's immorality was an outrage. To them it was immorality incarnate. Almost certainly there were depths of folk history or gossip to which as a child I was not privy. All I knew was that he was not to be spoken to.

He worked on the railway, cycled to work like my father, that heavy-footed, weary pedalling, heavy-footed because of the heavy work boots that had to be kept clear of the mudguard or chain or anything else they might knock against. In my recollection he had a moustache like Joseph Stalin, whom he admired. Claimed to be a communist was I think the usual description of him. Such beliefs could never

be held, only claimed to be held. And this claimed communism, of course, put him further into the world of demons.

Whether there was a specific incident for the ostracism, or whether it was a generalized moral disapprobation, I don't know. He had grown up in the city like my father, maybe they even knew each other as children. He represented that proletariat Dad was trying to escape from, that world of slums and council houses that his own parents had distanced themselves from, only to find as his next door neighbour another product of that same oppressed and oppressive world, and what was worse, an unreconstructed one, a defiant anti-bourgeois living in this salubrious, quasi-rural suburban street, amidst clerks and draughtsmen and small businessmen, and yet affirming his communism and contempt for conventional morality.

Once I remember him asking me through the hedge at the back of the house, 'Do your Mum and Dad have rows?' I expect I answered yes, since they did. And I think I reported the conversation, being of that age where suppression and deviousness had yet painfully to be learned. So I was in trouble for that, and the prohibition on fraternizing with the enemy was reiterated.

This is how I learned to feud and demonize, this is where political and cultural division began, in these sunbathed houses amidst the sunbathed fields, the horses docilely ploughing in the front, the teams of prisoners-of-war lugubriously hoeing at the back, fighter aircraft leaving condensation trails in the sky above.

Our neighbour on the other side was Mr Beck. He was always called Mr Beck, whereas Fessey was never given the title Mr. In part it was a class distinction, in part a mark of personal respect and disrespect.

Mr Beck drove a Rover and was partner in a horse-slaughtering business in town. He had made his money with a contract with the race-course, that kept the business going after horses became less and less used as beasts of burden. He must have slaughtered cattle, too, because on a couple of occasions he gave me a gift of hair balls, dark black balls about the size of a tennis ball, light in weight, taken from a cow's stomach, made from hair they'd licked and swallowed. Mysterious objects, I kept them with my Dinky aircraft on a shelf in my bedroom, strange rarities that I encountered nowhere else. Not until I read *Huckleberry Finn* and found Jim using hair balls for magic did I find any other authentication of their existence.

Mr Beck kept his gate open with a canon-ball ploughed up on his brother's farm. It was said to be a relic of the Battle of Worcester. Such relics of the Civil Wars were still occasionally ploughed up, three hundred years on. I would like to say it made history material to me, focussed an image of the English revolution that proved unforgettable. Years later perhaps it did. Years later, pressed by the publisher to provide an introduction to the essays I'd written on the writers of the English revolution, I recalled it. It gave me something to say in an introduction. But at the time it was little remarked. It was so little remarked that no one even contemplated stealing it, a black, iron ball holding back the wooden gate so Mr Beck could turn his Rover into his driveway without having to get out and undo

the latch. Insofar as it represented anything it was a counterbalance to Fessey the communist. The canon ball was from the Civil Wars and the Civil Wars automatically evoked the monarchy. Cromwell was just the unacknowledged other. Worcester was proudly called, or called itself, 'the faithful city' in commemoration of its loyalty to the Stuart dynasty. The doors to the Guildhall were flanked by a statue of King Charles I on the one side and King Charles II on the other. Up on the lintel a demonic head was sculpted, nailed there by its ears. It was traditionally identified as the regicide Oliver Cromwell. Historians have questioned the identification, as they have also questioned the City's faithfulness. An examination of the records reveals that there had been an equivalent commitment to anti-monarchical sentiments. Like so much of the United Kingdom, it was in fact a deeply disunited city.

The ideological battles persisted through my childhood. In the 1950s some Socialist councillors arranged for a plaque on the canal bridge to commemorate Cromwell's crowning victory, as he had called the Battle of Worcester. The plaque enraged the Tories, and the old gentleman for whom my aunt was housekeeper was moved to pelt it with tomatoes. But in those days tomatoes, apart from tasting a lot better than now, were a comparatively rare commodity, so he didn't. The Civil Wars invoked the glory of monarchy, even if Charles lost them and lost his head. Monarchy was restored and was still with us. History represented glory and continuity and privilege and order. For a while. The Civil Wars, we always called them. Not quite the Great Rebellion, as monarchists called it at the time. And not the English Revolution as I was to discover the Marxists called it.

Mr Beck was a cheerful countryman who took the *Farmer's Weekly*. He exchanged it with Dad's *Investor's Chronicle,* and they talked over the garden fence about farms and shares. Each day Dad's *Financial Times* was stuck in a gap in the hedge between us, and exchanged for the *Daily Express*. I never got much from the *Financial Times* in those early years, so the day old *Daily Express*, that rabid repository of imperialist reaction, was my introduction to the news. The Becks also took the more liberal *News Chronicle* so we had that too; or did they take the *Express* only after the *News Chronicle* ceased publication, as one by one the less virulent voices of the media were put out of business? And in the evenings Dad would send me round to the Becks', or worse up to Miss Burden's, to get his signature witnessed on a share certificate. Mr Beck and Miss Burden also invested. This was not quite Stendhal's provincial France where money was the only value. But often it seemed close. Had Dad encouraged them on these stock market investments and speculations, or had they always been involved? I think he might have encouraged them. Though Miss Burden's brother Harry who was a timber merchant on the Welsh border was a large scale player on the market. He used to call in once in a while for a talk, and his talk was entirely about the market. After a while my father found it exhausting, obsessive, there were other values and interests than money.

And then there was Wilf, Miss Burden's nephew, who ran a bicycle shop in Chipping Norton. He used to visit his aunt on weekends, just for a cooked meal, my mother would sniff, with the disdain she had for unmarried men, and his aunt would kick him out on a Sunday morning while she cooked

the roast, and he would come down to visit, with copies of *Flight* and *Aeroplane* magazines, which he would lend me for the week, or fortnight, till he next visited, but to my dissatisfaction they had to be returned for his collection, strange, shuffling Wilf, despaired of by the tyrannical old ladies, lost in dreams of aircraft and trapped through the week in bicycle chains and inner tubes. Why didn't he cut the lawns? Maybe sometimes he did.

Mr Beck with his Rover and own business was one of the small businessmen of the avenue. Mr Long the motor factor went one better with a Daimler. He would roar up the avenue, which was unsurfaced gravel, in a cloud of dust, delighting in the power of possession of a prestige car. Everyone complained. They resented the superior car, when many of us, most of us at that time, did not have cars. They resented even more the speed, the danger, the dust. It was a constant theme of resentment.

There were four of us roughly my age, Podge, Duncan, Snoz and myself. We quarrelled endlessly amongst ourselves and divided and subdivided into gangs and groups and alliances and exclusions, so who was behind this scheme I am not sure. Half way up the avenue was a gap between two houses, allowing for a road yet to be built. Duncan and Snoz lived the other side of the gap from Podge and me, and were held (by Podge and me) to belong to an inferior region, nearer the main road and the taint of urbanization. But the borders were continually crossed in our treaties and alliances. Whether the scheme proposed was a multilateral action or an independent initiative of the lower half, again I can't remember, and whether that is a diplomatic memory loss I can't remember either. But direct action was resolved upon. The adults complained about Mr Long's driving, the speed, the dust. We resolved to act. It was quite simple really. It just involved scattering a few old nails in the roadway.

We expected to be heroes, commandoes acting on behalf of an oppressed and fearful population. We were the vanguard of liberation, like the heroes of all those war books and war movies being pumped out, the younger generation who undertook the defence of tradition, rural peace, national values, safe driving.

It was a political lesson, though I don't think I recognized it as such. It provoked adult outrage. Duncan was generally suspected to be the culprit. Maybe because the nails were found in one of the potholes close to his house. I'm not even sure now that it was Mr Long whose car tyre was punctured. I think it could have been Podge's father's moped, that bicycle with a put-putting motor attached behind the saddle that was always breaking down.

All I remember is that it wasn't a famous victory. As I say, Duncan was generally held to be responsible. Later he became director of a fire-engine manufacturing company, whose fire engines were exported as much for water-canon riot control as for putting out fires. But none of us was free from suspicion. Direct action was held to be silliness, childishness, stupidity, delinquency, irresponsibility and all the rest of those words.

And Mr Long continued to sail past in his cloud of dust, day after day, as we watched from the roadside, ruminatively chewing plums.

It is hard sometimes to know if there is anything to write about, writing in this way. You lower the bucket down the well and see what it brings up. Wells, in fact, I don't remember. Pumps, yes, not only the school but many of the country cottages had a cast iron pump for water, probably cast in the foundry where Dad worked. So you would press down on the handle and see what spurted out. For all those years of playing in the avenue, not a lot. They were my childhood friends and in the end, which was soon, I was glad to be back at school meeting other boys. But in holidays and on weekends it was just the friends in the avenue, mutating into enemies with unsurprised regularity.

Podge lived nearest me, was nearly a year older, and I suppose I played most with him. His father was a clerk on the railways and had gone to the King's School on a scholarship the year after my Uncle Jack. But whereas Jack had been humiliated and tormented for being poor and working class, Mr Bryant always claimed (unconvincingly, I felt) that by the time he went there they were used to scholarship boys and he had no bad treatment. Podge nonetheless went to the Grammar school, not the King's, and his father was a strong Labour voter. As for Podge, my recollection is that he instinctively took the side of authority. He was not especially good at games, or anything in my opinion, but he played the game and was accepted by the games players. He became a bell-ringer. Last I heard he was a helicopter pilot in the Royal Navy with tours of duty in Hong Kong and Bosnia. Maybe he realized his father's grumbling politics of resentment led nowhere, except to a couple of breakdowns. Maybe with the fortunate dialectic of families he found himself on the winning side. Was it intelligence or the lack of it that enabled him to blend into that Midlands conservatism, a failure of the imagination or a clear-sighted vision?

Snoz was younger than me by a year or so, and also at the grammar school. With him I built Meccano model traction engines and aircraft and tried to collect registration numbers from low-flying aeroplanes. He was also a non-games player, but too cautious to be pressed into organised rebellion. Last I heard of him he was an engineer in the USA with his own private plane he flies to work. His father was a draughtsman with a passion for hi-fi and a love of classical music. That was felt to be a bit strange, and his refusal to cultivate his garden a scandal. Mrs Robertson laboured to keep a lawn and flowerbed in the front, but the back was let run wild in tussocks of grass. One summer I instigated a rescue operation with Snoz, and maybe Duncan, and we dug over the wild grass at the back, preparing it for cultivation. Again, my memory fades, but I suspect it was an intrusive gesture not well received, an attempt to normalize the garden for Snoz's acceptability that his father deeply resented.

Duncan went to the secondary modern school, had failed the eleven plus, so was labelled with that stigma, not only by us but inevitably in his own self-assessment. But he was another Meccano modelling friend. Later he built himself a sports car from a kit, and later became a director of that fire-engine manufacturers that his uncle ran, but it went bankrupt.

Is that all there is to remember? Throwing a stone or toy at Podge and gashing his head, the one time I got in a winning blow, the one time I threw something that hit its aim. Examining Podge's younger

sister in the tent across the road from their house. Cricket in the summer evenings in the avenue, a ball into a garden meant four and out, into the field meant six and out, Dad sometimes joining in to bowl, me as ever missing catches, returning a ball erratically, wide.

Dad and Fessey and Mr Beck and Mr Wood the milkman next door to him all spoke with the local accent. Mr Beck was perhaps more rounded, more countrified: there were differences between city and country. But this was the way they had always spoken, and unselfconsciously. Some of the formulations, some of the words, reached straight back to the Anglo-Saxon. 'What a charm those birds are making,' Dad would say when the sparrows or the finches were in some loud dispute or merry-making. Later I found the word in *Paradise Lost:* 'the charm of earliest birds.' It was from *cearm*, Anglo-Saxon for noise or song, and that no doubt from Latin *carmen*. It was just part of the vocabulary, like the way Dad would naturally say 'Hark' when he heard some sound he wanted us to listen to: outside of the region it would sound archaic. Like the 'Whoa' and 'Giddy-up' the farmer called out to the horses in the fields at the front.

The city had some of these survivals. The street leading into the Cornmarket was called Melcheapen street, which I was to find out learning Anglo-Saxon at university meant just that, *mel*, meal, corn, and *ceapen*, to sell, market. At the time it was a word about which we had no curiosity, just the name of a street. Another was Barbourne Road which crossed over Barbourne brook, the route Charles II took when he escaped from Worcester and went on to hide in an oak tree. We all knew about King Charles' escape, though not the reasons why. And the house he escaped from was down there by the Cornmarket, though I don't remember that it had a plaque on it at that time. But no one told us that Barbourne was a contraction of Beaverbourne, beaver brook, alluding like Bevere green near where we lived to the days when beavers swam in the waterways. That the street behind the High Street where all the butchers' shops were was called The Shambles was just the name of the street, and its historic identification with butchering unknown to us. Then there was The Butts, where archery had been practised beside the old city wall, Friar Street where Greyfriars house was, a medieval friary, the Foregate where one of the city gates had been, the Tything, upper and lower Tythings, redolent of the cathedral's financial imposition on the city, Deansway, where the Bishop's palace was, Castle Street, where the castle stood no longer, an entire history encapsulated in street names that have a magic for me now, but then were simply street names, whose significance was lost, or if anyone knew their significance they did not tell us. And even these were the words of the Anglo-Saxon invaders; the Britons had left no trace, either driven across the river and into Wales, or lying low and interbreeding with the conquerors.

The history embedded in those words was a forgotten silent history, known only to a handful of local antiquarians. It was not respected, neither history nor words. The whole project of the school was to deny us our natural language. Suppressions of class and race and history. At morning assembly we were regularly harangued in the Perrins Hall, named after our school benefactor who was portrayed there, gold framed, standing on the skin of a tiger he had slaughtered, Dyson Perrins of Lea and Perrins Worcestershire Sauce, still manufactured in Worcester at that time, yet not something we ever had at

home. Harangued rather than lectured, usually by the second master, Mr Stratford, he of the hammy theatrical tones. We were told not to say buzz for public transport, but bus, with a sibilant s, not the regional, rural buzzing z, not the closed vowel, but the received standard open vowel. But buzz was the word we always used, it rhymed with goosegogs. As for Oi, first person singular, it was endlessly prohibited, our expression of individual identity denied. It had to be the wide-mouthed, gleaming-toothed southern bourgeois I, not the rounded, round lipped Oi. At my sister's school, the girls' grammar school, they had formal elocution lessons, though the teachers could still never get the girls to speak like the pupils at the fee-paying Alice Ottley school. Maybe they were not intended to speak too like them, anyway. And even though we did not have elocution lessons, the process was still a determined one. Endlessly the local idioms were denied. 'I ain't' and 'I aren't' were prohibited in favour of the 'I'm not' that was so unnatural to us. I as subject, me as object, was rigorously enforced. 'T'ain't me' was prohibited. Yet who would ever say, 'It is not I'?

The focus on first person singular surely had hugely damaging effects on confidence, on any ability in self-expression. It meant you faltered whenever you encountered an I or a me. The prohibition on double negatives, that natural emphatic favoured by Shakespeare, who was born only twenty miles away, perhaps undercut our certainties, made us less sure, more seemingly tentative. But the endless anxieties about I and me surely did untold harm. I am not I, pity the tale of me.

Worse, of course, this linguistic colonialism was brought into the home. Lectured endlessly at school, we would parrot these corrections in the house. We? Well, I certainly did. So there I was, chirpily correcting my father's pronunciation or his grammatical formulations. These are scenes that do not bear recalling, that are best lost in the prevailing gloom such memories call up. It put me in the camp of Aunt Gladys, who was ever ready to correct him, and Mr Armstrong (whose housekeeper she was), who was not above having a go either, oh such helpful attempts to dispel working class vulgarity and ignorance. Gladys had remodelled her own accent on bourgeois norms, removed most traces of regionality. My mother, too, perhaps because the family had moved so often, perhaps because Gladys had tyrannized over her over the years, had pretty well a neutral accent. It was certainly not a Midlands one though traces of northern intonations remained. She, too, was ready enough to remove any extremes of Worcestershire from my speech, and wasn't above having a go at Dad once in a while.

So what a happy household that made us, particularly on Sunday tea-times when Gladys visited. What an endless battlefield of the class war, fought with words rather than deeds. This was the world of *Hudibras*, that sardonic mock epic of the Civil Wars, whose author Samuel Butler had been born in Worcestershire and whose father had held property in Barbourne, and in Claines, where I had gone to primary school. When Hudibras is in the stocks the Lady recognizes him, she tells him,

Not by your individual whiskers

But by your dialect and discourse.

Every Sunday my aunt came for tea. Aunt Gladys was my mother's elder sister. And if my mother was conservative, my aunt was unquestionably reactionary. She had a good heart, I must say

that now, she was generous and loving. But she had a vision of social order that was one of the major tyrannies of my childhood. I don't think my sister felt it so acutely. In many ways my sister resembled my father's sisters, who let things wash over them unregarded. But I was like my father, quick to rise, easy to provoke, full of fire and principle.

For the early years it was peaceful enough. In those years she was looking after my grandmother. But when my grandmother died, Gladys went back as housekeeper to a retired regional railway manager, Mr Armstrong. If you were an historian of railway development, the nineteenth century Armstrongs were a great name to conjure with. Indeed some specialist railway press published a history of the Armstrongs of the Great Western, and I remember proudly being given a copy of the book by the descendant himself. He was a genial, kindly old man, happy with his stamp collection, who lived at the other end of town. You went up Red Hill, named it was said from the blood that ran down it after the slaughter of the battle of Worcester, up past Cromwell Crescent – the name anathema to Mr Armstrong and Aunt Gladys – and there he lived in a modern black and white place called Tudor House. Where he held forth in ultra-rightist reaction against the evils of socialism, Cromwell, Archbishop Makarios, Atlee, the Soviet Union and so on, and the greatness of King Charles, Churchill, the monarchy and the empire. The other book he gave me was John Buchan's *Greenmantle*. All in this pseudo-Tudor house set in large grounds which Nellie, the maid's husband, a railway worker, tended. It was Mr Armstrong who called my Aunt J. B., after John Bull, for her staunch patriotism. Indeed her name was Bull, but her initials were G. B., and maybe to call her G. B. as in Great Britain would have been too blasphemously nationalistic, like taking the name of the lord, so J. B. it was, that colonizers' trick of renaming the colonized, as regularly practised in Britain's internal class-colonization as in its equivalent imperial atrocities.

Gladys imbibed these ultra-rightist sentiments on top of her own family's committed conservatism. It issued in weekly conflict, every Sunday as I recall there was some explosion as my father, and later I, was provoked to opposition and rage. For my father, share-owning democrat as he saw himself or arch-capitalist as I came to indict him, nonetheless had no love for the upper-classes, the traditional aristocracy and landowners, nor did he have any admiration for the splendour of imperial slaughter in Britain's acquisition and retention of empire.

Sometimes the battles would be over semantics. Language as much as anything else was the signifier of class difference in England. Accent placed you, and as far as my aunt was concerned my father's Worcestershire accent placed him. That he read widely and deeply was of no matter, his accent disqualified him from authority and literacy. So one evening when he described somebody as a cultivated man she gave her tut-tutting laugh and said, 'Cultured, you mean.'

'No, I don't,' said Dad.

'You can't be a cultivated man, Richard,' said Gladys, 'that's for fields. Cultured is the world you want.'

There is no need to continue the dialogue. That was the dialogue, cultivated versus cultured

endlessly repeated, Dad getting more and more angry, Gladys getting more and more huffy.

Why that particular example lodged in the memory and the countless others have evaporated, I don't know. Maybe because it focussed on that duplicity of the English language, which disturbed me in my quest for certainty, and came to delight me in my literary practice. So many ways of saying the same thing, so many varieties of formation. But other issues were more substantial – colonial wars, aristocratic divorces. Should I dig deeper to that memory where everything is said to be stored, or can it be taken as read, even if not written ?

And then I would have to escort my aunt down the avenue to the bus stop, while Dad fumed behind the Sunday paper in the living room, and the front room where the disputes were held became an empty no man's land, the fire dying down in it if were winter, or the last of the sun fading in the west if it were summer, and the Beacon and British Camp silhouetted on the sky line, reminders of aeons of battles fought and won and lost, and the thrush on the gable singing on in blithe disregard of it all with the transcendent irrelevance of song.

Mr Armstrong's daughter had married an Olympic runner called Godfrey Brown, who had run in the Berlin Olympics of 1936, and lost to the black American Jesse Owen, much to the Führer's fury. He became headmaster of the grammar school in 1950, the year I went into the prep. Before that he had taught at Cheltenham College, and it was to Cheltenham he sent his son, who was about my age. Adam Lindsay Gordon’s father had taught Hindustani at Cheltenham, and Gordon was a student there before coming to WRGS. Patrick White went there. It is the model for the movie *If*. The headmaster also had three daughters who went to the local posh private girls' school next door to the grammar school, the Alice Ottley.

Once in a while I would meet these children when they were visiting their grandparent and I was visiting their grandparent's housekeeper. Mr Armstrong was all very democratic about this, indeed so was his daughter in a gracious sort of way. But the headmaster was always stiff and distant and remote. I don't even remember if I ever encountered him on these occasions. He was always stiff and distant and remote, that was his unfortunate manner at school and how I remember him. And they all had these cracking superior upper class accents. Now, of course, it is clear to me that a master at a minor public school is hardly a leading figure in the British establishment. A minor functionary, perhaps, a higher sort of lackey, somewhere further up the ladder than my grandfather the groom, the head groom: but in that awful class structure clearly one of the functionaries. And the cracking accent and distant manner were no doubt a learned protection against insult and condescension and contempt somewhere up the scale. But at the time such insights were closed to me. What was always clear to me were the class differences, my inferior status.

That was also what was clear to my aunt, and why she was so keen to promote the connection. The connection, that is, of my playing with these children. She believed that some of their superior gloss might rub off on me, that I might develop their ways, their style, that their accents would become my accents and I would renounce the regional burr of my father's speech.

Somewhere there is a photograph of me playing with them in a park. I doubt that such occasions occurred often. Had Gladys been delegated to mind them, and taken the opportunity to bring me along too? I have absolutely no recollection of how often we met. Often enough for me to recognise them.

But that, of course, created its new torment at the school. Was I to greet them when I saw them going to and from the headmaster's house? Or was our acquaintance a private thing not to be admitted in the school grounds? Was there a denial on their part? Or was it tactical on my part amongst my schoolfellows to avoid indicating any personal, prior connexion with the headmaster's children? Did I begin by giving greetings and end up in surly silence? So many codes were in danger of being crossed here.

And of course the Brown children were the endless topic of my Aunt's Sunday visits. The marvels of these children. Their achievements. Their style. Their charm. So that in the end, over the ten years I was at the school, and through all the ensuing years, right up into my fifties, I came to hate the very mention of them.

Is that all there is to say about them? It seems pathetically little for the impact their existence had on me, for the endless adulatory bulletins of their progress delivered by my aunt, for ten years of seeing the girls pass in and out of the headmaster's Georgian house and down the gravelled drive way to the Tything and along to the Alice Ottley School entrance. Images of what I took to be inalienable distance, though one of the daughters ended up impregnated by a grammar school student, and a proletarian one at that I think. And the grammar school and the Alice Ottley have now merged. But to me it was all separations and distance, a memory of my aunt's menial status and social aspirations, a mark of comfortable privilege while my father rode home night after night covered with foundry soot.

Grammar School

So aged seven or eight I left the little county school, Claines C of E School, in my mother's eyes its being a Church of England school gave it more status, it was not just a state school, it had a distance from proletarian state education, it was attached to older, earlier, better values of church and countryside, C of E was something to make a point of spelling out when filling in the forms required for the scholarship to the grammar school, the Royal Grammar School, again the Royal distinguished it from the run of the mill grammar schools, this had been give a royal charter by Queen Elizabeth in 1561. In the middle of town was Queen Elizabeth's house, as it was called, an old black and white house with a balcony on which she was said to have stood to speak to the people, her people, in 1575. It wasn't a very impressive house and it was amazingly curved and bowed and distorted as if over the years it only wanted to lie down, but it was there, and there she was in effigy on the front of the old hall, the old school building, though old of course only in a comparative sense, this was a nineteenth century institutional Gothic building but the school had been old even when Queen Elizabeth had given it its charter, it had been going for nearly as long before that date, give or take a hundred years, as it had been since, founded before 1291 we were proudly told, 1291, it was beyond comprehension when you had only lived eight years, what was it, six hundred and fifty nine years old and you were eight? 1291 is the date of the first conclusive evidence that the school was functioning, but according to some accounts it was founded in 685 by Bishop Bosel, making it the fifth oldest school in the United Kingdom.

I have no idea what impression that weight of history made on me. Probably none at all. It was just something that was, or that was asserted to be, and by the time you had developed any historical sense it was so over familiar that for the second time it failed to make any impression.

Once again it was detachment that I experienced. The prep school, the preparatory school for the grammar school, was a strange little building separate from the main school, within the grounds but in some sort of out-house. Did we have our own playground so we weren't trampled to death by the big boys? Did we have a separate entrance?

It was taught by two ladies, while the rest of the school had all male teachers. So we were sort of there but not really, we had passed the entrance examinations to the prep school but we weren't quite in the grammar school proper, though it was generally assumed that if you'd got into the prep you'd get into the grammar school, they weren't going to kick you out again at eleven, were they? Always these uncertainties, these further tensions, like being a junior academic waiting for tenure, a whole life of structured insecurity. So whereas it looked like, from outside maybe, that once in there you were truly in, from inside it seemed a bit less certain than that.

And now it's another two years I can't remember. This is worse than the fifteen years stoned

during the bad years, of which I still remember far too much. What did we do at the prep school? Almost nothing survives that I can recall. Certainly nothing from the classroom. I cannot even remember if there was one classroom or two. Did the second form perhaps have a class room in the main school building? But even if it did, I still remember nothing about it.

I have a photograph of a row of us on the headmaster's lawn. They are all dressed up as figures from *Alice in Wonderland*, all except me. And I am standing up reading from a book. Was that because I was a better reader or a worse actor? I can't remember what it was I was reading from. There was Jurek Martin dressed up as the dormouse, all ginger freckles (his own) and whiskers (added), later USA correspondent of the *Financial Times*. There was the mad hatter and the rest of them. And me, of them yet not of them, reading from a book. Preparing for my own future.

There is another memory, but I am unsure whether it belongs to the first year in the prep or the first year in the school proper. I was somewhere near the Perrins Hall. The second master called out to me. The second master, Mr Stratford, was the embodiment of authority. The headmaster was remote, distant, diffident even. But Mr Stratford was everywhere, his white hair a mark of age which was a mark of authority, his booming, theatrical voice intoning prayers or announcements or threats in assembly, his gown – they all wore gowns, all the masters, but his seemed the most gown-like of all, the ultimate insignia of ultimate authority. Authority was what he represented, discipline, punishment.

It emerged later, of course, that he was the most self-fashioned of all the masters, had been the least qualified, had qualified himself in the course of teaching by taking an external degree from London University. How significant these hierarchies were, how important the gradations between real degrees (Oxford and Cambridge), also-rans (provincial universities), and these other things like external degrees. But this particular fact was not known to us, Mr Stratford with his grand voice and overbearing manner was the epitome of quality, authority, authentic pedagogy.

And he called me over to him and asked me my name.

What had I done? I hadn't been running in the playground, that most heinous of crimes. I hadn't been punching or jostling anybody. I hadn't been doing anything. For weeks I waited for retribution. I gave him my name and spent weeks in terror. Would I be called back for detention? Would my name be read out at prayers? Would a message be sent to my parents? Would I be taken out of a class and summoned off elsewhere?

It was my initiation into fear. Even writing this I can feel the tension in my stomach, I can feel my breathing rhythm has changed, I feel strange palpitations by my heart, my whole body has tensed up, my hand writes as freely as ever but the rest of me is taut, tense, my legs crossed more tightly, my foot pressing on the floor, my leg going numb with pins and needles from the pressure and constriction, and all for what, what was it ever for? I never knew, I never dared ask, I never dared tell anyone. It was a secret fear I kept hidden within myself, lying sleepless at night, waking up in terror, what was going to be the consequence, what was he going to do, what had I done, all

the unadmitted guilts of my eight or ten years slithered around inside me, waiting to be hauled up and exposed to the light.

Was it intended as a threat? Was this authority showing its iron fist to let me know it was there, I was watched, I was known, my name was given and recorded and remembered, I was ever after on file, was that it? I never knew. But the fear remained, the fear remained irrevocably implanted, all the stronger for the not knowing, for the never explained charge, for the unspecified crime, for the very ambiguity of the whole episode, that might not have been one of hostile authority, authority might not be hostile after all, might it, it might be friendly, loving, caring, concerned, mightn't it, might it?

But my body knows, my increased heart rate, my unconsciously clenched teeth, my held breath, my constricted throat, over half a century later, paralysed again with those same symptoms, and Mr Stratford and the headmaster long ago consigned to the flames, my body knows the truth. And I am horrified at how imprinted it all is, how unfree authority can make you, me, so early on, and for so long, for ever if it had its wish.

Now we joke about him, Mr Stratford. When Jim Berrow took me back to the school to make a television documentary about my writing, we joked about how Mr Stratford used to lecture the first-formers on the birds and the bees. And how when there was a spate of graffiti in the toilets he wanted the prefects to get up in the roof and position themselves to watch over the urinals. But this is the frightened mirth of the fearful, this is trying to shake off the shadow, trying to neutralize the curse, trying to deny that fear before authority that Mr Stratford and that school system had so successfully imprinted on us. Now he is safely dead we can mock the monster that threatened our youth.

Is this why I have forgotten so much? Did I come to some rational decision not to remember it, to turn aside from the horror and be free? If it could not be challenged or confronted, let alone overcome, at least it could be turned away from.

But when you turn back and look into it, then the heart rate goes up and the breathing falters and you are back there, paralysed in the school yard yet once more.

If I recall almost nothing of the prep school perhaps that is because it was a moment of innocent peace. But the grammar school proper offers up immediately a series of horrors. Of course there must have been good moments, even idyllic, no there is no need to let language take us into nonsense, not idyllic, but at least tolerable moments. But the horrors, there is no need of verbal stratagems to reveal them, they have never vanished.

The mark of entry to the school proper was milk duty. This was the time of free school milk, whether you wanted it or not, you had to drink these bottles of milk, about a third of a pint. But governmental edict for the provision of milk was one thing, distributing it another. So the junior students were assigned to milk duty. Two boys to a milk crate, holding it between them, delivering

it to the classrooms, hurry up, don't slack, get along there, along the slippery corridors, up the treacherous stairs, corridors and stairs made of some slippery granite, or concrete impregnated with granite, worn shiny and slippery with the endless shuffling footsteps of the students. So endlessly they fell, they would be struggling round the slippery stairs and the weight of the crate would tug at them and they would miss a footing and fall and then the crash of the metal crate and the tinkling echoes of the shattering glass would resonate through the corridors, and the smell of milk would seep beneath the doors. And then some master would stick out a head from a classroom and yell and the shaken, shattered crate-carriers would be sent off for a mop and bucket to clean it all up, before the end of the next period, and if they were not finished in time mobs of pupils moving from classroom to classroom would wash over them as they bent and crouched there trying to pick up the splinters of glass, mop up the milk with the stinking rancid mop and cloth. And on it went, week after week it seemed, the crash, the clang, the echo in the brutal corridors.

But was I ever on milk duty? The whole thing was such a horror, I've clearly suppressed all specific memory of it. Maybe only the C streams were assigned to milk duty, that was the sort of school it was. All I know is that it was something terrifying that you feared would come to you, the next year, the next term, or whenever, but whether it ever did come, whether I ever slipped and fell and watched the crate and bottles rolled down the stairs, I seem not to know.

And the gym, the ropes, the wall bars you were expected to climb. I couldn't do it. I was desperate with terror. Let alone the vaulting horse. Or the parallel bars. I don't know whether it was because I had no head for heights, whether in some previous incarnation I had taken a mighty fall and the fear was imprinted. Or whether it was the sheer brutality of the school system, the throw you in and watch you sink attitude. Maybe introduced to it more gently I could have mastered all these things. But there was nothing gentle, and I didn't. This I don't even want to write about. The light yellow brown timber of the floor, the wall bars, the bars that were winched up and down, the lining up in teams, the endless endless public humiliations. Year after year.

And then the showers. That was another horror. Presumably my parents had inculcated a strong sense of shame for the naked body. They were deeply, immovably puritanical in that regard. So having to plunge into the showers with a class of twenty other naked boys was a disruption of all that programming, a confrontation of all the home conditioning. And then all the brutality of the towel flicking, pushing around, all the traditions of beating into shape that again is mercifully faded from consciousness. Just another weekly torment, a weekly ritual of humiliation and shame and brutalizing that sounds nothing in itself, but produced its fears throughout the week, fears of the imminent, recollections of the past, reinforcing each other into a continuum of horror.

I blame it all on the school. Most of it, anyway. I know the issue is not apportioning blame, but coming to terms with my physical self. But my physical self was a poor terrified thing and for that I blame the school with its regimen of gym and organized games. I was hopeless at all of it. And being hopeless at gym and games, and being told and made constantly aware of how hopeless I was, the

only recourse was to reject the failures of the body and live in the head. Rebelliously.

Gym and the showers, they seem to be the prime sites of horror, games excepted, games we will come to later. There were other pettinesses. The long walk, for instance, connecting the old building to the newer science buildings and gym. It was called the long walk because it was prohibited to run on it, ever, but boys were always having to run to avoid being late for a class, and then they were easy sport for a master or prefect to call them over, and order then to write a hundred lines, or stay back after school in detention. The arbitrary long walk, seemingly there simply as an entrapment for punishment.

Prefects had the power to beat. Some did, some didn't. I never did. It was there as the peak of the system, beating by a prefect, this was the pinnacle of the pyramid that held all the rest of prefectorial authority in place.

Sanctioned brutality. You could avoid it. I avoided most of it. But it was the climate of arbitrary power, of irrational regulation, of excess, that characterized the school. It was a matter of being terrorized into conformity. To a degree it worked: some especially distasteful conformists were produced and the school was a considerable provider for the military.

But for me, though I tried for a conformity, it never sat comfortably. Because it was enforced by threat I never felt it was easily mine. It was a conformity from fear, and the further fear was that it would slip off and reveal the failure to conform beneath. And that in itself ultimately bred the doubt and scepticism and contempt for the enforced conformity, and the lifelong commitment to resistance and refusal.

The whole school experience was permeated by a sense of class, inculcated it indeed. But that is to say nothing more than that the whole English experience was permeated by a sense of class. The sense would have been there, grammar school or no grammar school.

Even the school itself was ambiguously situated. Older than Eton they told us, but how did that help us? The initials, WRGS, were variously interpreted as Worcester Rotten Gutter Snipes or Worcester Ragged Gutter Sweepers, or any permutation of the two. Perhaps once I can remember kids from one of the other schools, one of the secondary moderns, calling this out. But I don't remember any other occasion. No, this was a terminology of the past, of more confrontational class divisions, of a nineteenth-century town and gown style hostility. It remained there in the folklore, of course. I remember Mr Armstrong, who had gone to some minor public school, Clifton College, and was a proud member of the governing council, intoning it. It was adults who savoured it. Did it recall moments of their own experience? Did it provide a necessary validation of their own ascendancy? Or was it even with them mere hearsay? The pleasurable hearsay of social discrimination so endemic to Britain. Whatever the explanation, it was there. Though it was not abuse hurled at us in the streets. It hung there in the ether. It was part of some other plane co-existing with us.

And it was troubling. There we were, we had passed our examinations, won our scholarships, we

were out of the ruck of our generation, surely we were now privileged, wearing our uniforms, our school ties, our caps. So why then were we called ragged, rotten, why were we yet again assigned to the gutter from which we thought we had risen?

Because that was what we had risen from, of course. We were scholarship boys. Careers open to talents, maybe. But the stigma of scholarships stuck to us. We were marked as having been plucked out of our destitute environments, our cultural and economic imprisonment, we were picked out to go forward, but where we came from was never to be allowed to be forgotten.

Our future rulers, our contemporary leaders, our betters, we never encountered. They were all packed off to private schools, public schools, language torturing itself with lies at this point. They were too remote from us for us even to consider their existence. I read about them in school yarns borrowed from the library. But they were as remote as goblins, fairies, crusaders, Africans, explorers, South Sea islanders, Picts, Huns, Chinamen and anything else I read about.

Within the city, however, there was another school, which allowed gradations to be made. This was the King's School, attached to the cathedral. Both these schools, the Kings and the Grammar, had been private foundations until the 1944 education act. They had always given a handful of scholarships, but basically were fee-paying schools for the local middle classes. After 1944 the grammar school went into the state school system, admission was by the eleven-plus examination, fees were no more. The prep department was closed down the year after I entered it. But the King's school stayed out of the state system and remained fee paying. Or maybe it went partially into the system and took some eleven-plus students and some fee-paying students. Consequently, or anyway, it was deemed to be higher in the social scale of things, higher up the cosmic ladder. Which was the other reason we were ragged gutter sweepers: we were the state school scholarship boys, they had the privilege and cachet of independence, meaning money.

There were scholarships to the Kings school. My uncle had won one back in the 1920s. And that was the reason I would never have gone to the King's school. He was in the first batch of boys admitted on the basis of scholarship, and was victimized as a result, humiliated by the masters for not having the proper uniform, for raggedness, for his accent, for his background. My father would talk about it sometimes, the rotten time they had given Jack, these were stories that haunted my childhood, stories of injustice and cruelty that Jack had suffered, that perhaps made my father relieved in one aspect that though he'd been denied an education he had been spared these humiliations, stories that haunted me and provided a context of fear that this might yet happen to me – it didn't – that this indeed was my destiny and I would be spared it only by some colossal luck, which I did not expect, or some continual, fearful evasion. So Jack's experiences as scholarship boy from an ironmoulder's family shadowed me through school, the raggedness of his clothes reiterated in my being a ragged gutter snipe, his attempt to escape his class role reaffirmed in the asserted destiny of being a rotten gutter sweeper.

Amongst the endless paradoxes that my father presented was a love of those classic tales of public school, Talbot Baines Reed's *The Fifth Form at St Dominic's* and the early P. G. Wodehouse Mike and Psmith stories. I read them all. He used to take me down to the City Library, in the Foregate, and let me fossick around the shelves, digging out these nineteenth and early twentieth century volumes, still preserved. It was all very remote from the grammar school and even more remote from his own experience. It is a mystery to me why he had so enjoyed them. A life he would have liked to have led? An insight into a world from which he was excluded? A romantic celebration of male friendship? The successes of the sports field would of course have appealed to him. For me, those were the less interesting bits: I identified with the outsiders, the persecuted.

I read them all and they must have imprinted something on my consciousness. But studies, and fags, and dormitories, and boarding, all this was a world away from anything I knew. Oddly, the grammar school still had its boarding house, but we never knew anything much of that world of the boarders. Or what we did know seemed unremarkable and bore no relationship to these public school yarns.

In due course I discovered more of Wodehouse. Yet it was years before I realized Bertie Wooster's surname was pronounced Worcester. And reading Robert McCrum's biography of Wodehouse decades later, I discovered that Worcestershire was a favourite county of Wodehouse's, where he often took holidays. Bertie's Aunt Dahlia, the only aunt he likes, lives in the county.

My father's other favourites had been those nineteenth century celebrators of empire, R. M. Ballantyne and G. A. Henty. And I read those too. Twenty-five years later I had a brief dialogue with Princess Margaret. I was introduced as someone who had written a novel about a *ménage à trois*. Her attention momentarily perked up.

'Is it really about a *ménage à trois*?' she asked.

It wasn't, really.

'My children like to read,' she said. 'G. A. Henty, that sort of thing.'

And then there was the *Boy's Own Paper*, that nineteenth century institution that combined tales of public school with tales of empire. It was still being published and this was the magazine I used to buy, harassing the poor shopkeeper when it arrived a day late, complaining and calling again and again till it arrived. The *BOP* had been a favourite of my father's too and somewhere he acquired for me a turn of the century *Boy's Own Annual*, the bound up issues of a year, 1905 or thereabouts, an endless, inexhaustible treasure of stories and serials and illustrations. When I had scarlet fever, he found a second-hand copy of a *Chums* annual, 1927, which I read avidly, too, a bit more up to date if a bit more down-market. The graphics of these annuals fascinated me, the decorated capital letters with which a story began, the identifying title images which were run with each part of a serial. Later, at church fetes, I would browse through the second hand magazines and start buying back numbers of the *Boy's Own*, stretching my own collection back in time, back into the second world war years.

Success in those tales of public schools was always found on the playing fields. Sometimes there would be a swot, or a fat boy, or a worm, an outsider who was no good at games: but by the end of the book he would have turned and changed and played a mighty innings or scored a winning try and redeemed himself. So there was always hope of redemption.

But not for me. I never achieved it. Never. Mr Armstrong bought me a cricket bat. It was a gift I could have done without. I religiously oiled it with linseed oil, but I could never co-ordinate with any skill or grace or competence. Dad would throw a cricket ball at me on the back lawn to practice my fielding, but I could rarely catch it. I was terrified of the leather-clad ball hurtling at me, at the wicket or on the field. And I could never bowl either.

Football, I remember the endless rubbing of dubbin onto my football boots, which were second-hand and always hard and uncomfortable and didn't seem to fit. Maybe I could have managed football but the headmaster abolished soccer as one of his first acts on arriving and introduced rugger. Soccer was proletarian. The public schools played rugby football and he wanted his place in the Headmasters' Conference, that federation of headmasters of the non-state schools. He was apparently entitled to membership since the grammar school had retained its board of governors and some notion of independence, since it was a direct grant school rather than a state school. How important these distinctions of status were held to be, so important that I still remember the crucial terminology – direct grant – even when most of the lived details of daily existence at the school have all but totally faded away.

So rugger it was, in all its barbarism, and I hated that, terrified to tackle, terrified of being kicked in the head by someone's boots. Mud and cold and brutality. I couldn't understand any of it, the bizarre rules, the arbitrarily acceptable and unacceptable, the taboos and shibboleths. In the cold and the mud with our arms wrapped round each other as we pushed against each other in the scrum, choking, suffocating. And I always did something wrong.

'Use your head, Wilding,' the sports master shouted from the sidelines, running up and down in his tight little shorts with his shiny little whistle in his tight little mouth.

I lowered my head and pushed with it.

There was howl of rage and scorn.

Why were the instructions so ambiguous? A training in life.

Success at school, as in those the school yarns I read, was found on the playing-fields. So success was not mine. Ostracism and outsiderdom were soon my lot. There were others of us, I tried to make alliances, but as with all tyrannical systems, the oppressed are more concerned to ingratiate themselves individually with the tyrants than to form an alliance of opposition. So it was at school, so it was with academic staff in the university, so with much of the literary world. The school was the great training ground for this fear of resistance, for the kow-towing ingratiation with authority, with its hierarchy of command and status, through the masters, the prefects, the sporting captains.

Years ago I could probably have waxed plangently lyrical about Flagge Meadow, the sports field

beside the canal, site of horror and despair and torment on those games afternoons. Much of the time I got myself relegated to linesman rather than being involved in the mayhem on the field. But since I never understood the rules, I was soon demoted from that. Couldn't I have learned the rules? Couldn't I have participated as scorer beside the cricket field. Scorer, scores-man? I cannot even remember the term. Some people of comparable incompetence at least supported the concept of the game, the principle of it all, and cheered and waved and did the scoring or whatever. Not me. I put myself in total opposition to all of it, which meant I was in opposition to pretty well the ideological totality of the school. It was a good training. It was obviously a self-selected role. The writer as outsider. Outside everything. Even his own body.

At this point the conventions of narrative require some specificity. A vignette. A cameo. The roar from the crowd as the winning try is scored or the batsman is caught out or the six is struck over the pavilion roof. But none of that comes to mind. What I remember is arguing with one of the school prefects, David Dilks, against the invasion of Egypt by the British-French-Israeli coalition. An invasion since universally regarded as unjustified, criminal even, as well as incompetent. The prime-minister, as prime-ministers do, lied about it all to parliament and the people, chaps at the Foreign Office went to work wearing black armbands, and the country was, as ever, deeply divided. It was a heated argument, when I should have been watching the house games and cheering on my team. The prefect defended the government. He went on to become head boy, chairman of the Oxford University Conservative association, and one of the researchers helping the mendacious prime-minister in question write his memoirs. The last I heard he was a Vice-Chancellor. I remember him standing outside the Prefects' Room in the Perrins' Hall, holding his cane with a hand at each end and flexing it.

Cricket was for the summer term, football for winter, and in the damp and dismal spring term we had cross-country runs. Out of the school gates, down the back streets, along the canal bank, up some appalling, atrocious slippery hill of red clay, round the deserted aerodrome. I wrote a short story about the horrors of it in which some poor victim fell, broke a leg, and was left to die. An early exercise in naturalism, if not realism. I published it in an alternative school magazine I had created and printed with a friend from the boarding school, Alistair Davie, who was later expelled. I wrote another story when I had left school; a story full of sympathy for the rain-drenched, shivering, freezing, sweating, mud-spattered little boys, of whom I had been one. But at least cross-country running required no skills. In the end I wasn't so bad at it. I realized after a while that it was better to keep running and get it over with, than to walk and dawdle and drag it out interminably. But it's not something I have ever wanted to do again.

Thirty years later I was back in my home town for a television documentary on my writing, and the producer, Jim Berrow, insisted on re-visiting the school. Back in the physics room I gazed into space as the camera zoomed in from outside. Altogether it was a traumatic experience. It was even more traumatic for Jim, who had been there too. I would happily have kept well away. But Jim had

his own ghosts he needed to lay, and as we trampled round looking for locations, he encountered them. He re-examined the room where he was caned, the corner he was stood in, every spot of humiliation and torture. By the end of it he was quite ashen and shattered. In revenge we managed to get the headmaster playing croquet on his croquet lawn. It wasn't the same headmaster, but one headmaster was likely to be much like another, and if you can get an authority figure to make a fool of himself in public for a million viewers, it is very satisfying. And playing croquet seemed pretty foolish.

The director, David Dunn, worked his charm. 'People will do anything if you tell them it's for television,' he said.

The head told him how he had learned Russian in order to read Dostoevsky.

'Don't you find he loses something in the original?' David asked.

'Oh, yes,' the head concurred, eagerly.

Jim and David looked for filmic settings. They liked the cross-country run story. It had something visual. They waited for a vile, rainy day and sent a batch of wretched second-formers out on a run and filmed them. I kept away while they filmed that bit. But they showed me the footage. I was appalled. It looked good. It brought back memories. Nothing, indeed, seemed to have changed much. But my attack on the system had only served to reassert it. I had left the school and was no longer forced onto cross-country runs. An excerpt from my story had even appeared in the official school history by A. R. Wheeler, Mr Stratford's successor as second master. But in making the documentary, I had been instrumental in sending out yet another generation of shivering schoolboys into the misery of mud and rain and an afternoon of trudging through them. Such was the price of art. Or at least the price of documentary film-making. There was a lot to be said for the written word in contrast, I reflected. With the written word you can just make things up out of nothing, invent them, remember them, and write them. Without having to go out there again into the rain and gravel and mud of diurnal existence. Without sending anyone else into it, either.

Books and writing increasingly became the focus of my life. Or at least my hopes. Even now I can remember the children's library, the old Victorian building with its high Gothic revival windows and shadowy corners. It wasn't only a retrospective of my father's reading that I pursued. I began to find my way into the contemporary – Capt. W. E. Johns' Biggles, endless Biggles. And after Biggles there was Geoffrey Trease, whose historical adventures offered a more progressive, radical history than the tales of empire, and I read all of his books that I could find, too.

The fiction shelves were in a bay and I still remember their arrangement. Anthony Buckeridge's Jennings stories on the left, Captain W. E. Johns' Biggles in the middle, Geoffrey Trease in the right hand corner, Percy J. F. Westerman's aviation adventures in the dark end on the right. And I remember the delight of being allowed behind the counter to date-stamp the books that other children borrowed. Child labour, and unpaid at that; but it was admission into the mystery of libraries.

I have fewer precise memories of where things were in the adult library. Not that I didn't spend a lot of time there. I would call in after school, scouring the shelves, but as much as looking for books I was hoping for girls. Bookish girls with romantic yearnings. We would peer through the shelves and our eyes would meet and lock, and then we would walk out to our bicycles and ride off together through the evening streets. It never happened, of course. But that in no way lessened the erotic frisson that the thought of going to the library produced. It tells more about the nature of erotic desire than the nature of libraries, perhaps. But the libraries always provided a fulfilment: the satisfactions of literature compensating for what was lacking in life.

Second-hand bookshops provided another of the addictive pleasures of my early years. In part, of course, it was a matter of the economic base. I could not afford to buy new books, apart from the occasional Penguin or Pelican. And new books of any interest were not easily found in most country towns. But in the back streets could be found junk shops with trays of books outside on the pavement, and in Friar Street there were two or three musty old second-hand bookshops, ramshackle decaying fifteenth-century buildings with narrow, precarious staircases, uneven creaking floors, pokey windows. And there the treasures were, rows and rows of books on shelves bending with their weight, ranked along the floor in front of the shelves and stacked in piles beneath the uncleaned windows of grimy, dusty rooms. I still revisit them in dreams.

First of all it was Biggles I looked for. I had exhausted the children's library supply of Biggles' World War 2 adventures. But with huge delight I found one of the never reprinted Biggles adventures from World War 1. He was flying Sopwith Camels rather than Hawker Hurricanes and Supermarine Spitfires. But he was still the same age. That gave me some momentary puzzlement, but the aeronautical evolution offered at the same time a historical development that fascinated me. There was nothing to do other than accept that in the realms of fiction age did not wither them. It was the first of those intimations of immortality that literature held out to me.

Biggles was a rare find. Most of the volumes were theological. Self-published sermons. Commentaries on *Revelations.* If I had bought them and read them, who knows, I might have become a better person. But amongst the theology lurked the classics of literature. As I reached my teens and set my sights on the literary life, I began to assemble a library of Victoriana. Imitation leather bound volumes of a collected edition of George Eliot, almost a complete set. All but one of twenty, or was it thirty, volumes of Maria Edgeworth. The incompleteness of the editions was the reason they were consigned to the dusty shelves and the ignominy of the floor. The complete editions were locked away in glass-fronted bookcases in the somewhat cleaner room where the proprietor sat.

Later, at Oxford, there was a marvellous little shop across the road from my college. In a tray outside were the shilling throw-outs. It was always worth browsing through. I once bought Keats' letters with Lascelles Abercrombie's signature on the fly leaf there. Who now remembers Lascelles Abercrombie? He is as forgotten as those one time bestsellers whose titles stocked the second hand

shops: W. J. Locke, Ethel M. Dell, Rafael Sabatini. Ah, time's oblivion, that countervailing force to literature's capacity to confer immortality.

They were a strange breed, second hand booksellers. Frequently obsessives, often alcoholics, always deeply suspicious that you might have discovered a rarity they had missed. I remember Leon Cantrell asking me to go into a Brisbane shop to buy some arcane piece of Australiana he had noticed. The owner knew he was a collector and refused to sell anything to him, suspecting it was worth more than the price marked on it.

But for true romantics, which many book-collectors undoubtedly are, other mysterious possibilities could always be detected, or at least suspected, just beneath the surface. There is always that mythic second set of books. Who can forget the episode in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep,* when Philip Marlowe quizzes the sales assistant about rare editions of which she clearly knows nothing, and the shop turns out to be a front for pornography and blackmail? Of course Marlowe knows nothing about rare editions either, he is just as fraudulent – something that Humphrey Bogart insouciantly captured in the movie. And then there is Johnny Depp's hauntingly sinister portrayal of a book dealer in Roman Polanski's *The Ninth Gate,* tracking down one of those mythic Renaissance volumes that contains magic powers of destruction to be unleashed on the world.

Over the years I built up a huge, if eccentric, library of standard authors and forgotten critics, the collected essays of once eminent men of letters, the *belles lettres* of no longer remembered essayists. These latter served to provide quotations for university examination questions I had to devise. I would find some authoritative pronouncement, some firmly expressed judgement, copy it out, add 'Discuss', and that was it. By then I was in gainful employment and could afford to buy new books, or solicit inspection copies. Later I tried my hand at publishing and developed new addictions: the smell of fresh printers' ink, the feel of clean laminated covers, the sensuous touch of unthumbed paper. New books were so much cleaner. They didn't cover you with dust and make you sneeze.

Now the second-hand bookshops are a threatened species. First of all they were driven out of the city centres by rental costs they could no longer afford, then they were rendered moribund by the internet. I remember my last visit to Nicholas Pounder’s shop in Double Bay.

'That's it,' he greeted me.

'That's what?' I asked.

'The shop. It's finished.'

I looked around. Gradually it dawned on me that this was not the usual, familiar clutter. The boxes stacked everywhere were boxes of books about to be removed. The shelves were bare.

'I no longer need a shop,' he said. 'There are no longer any regular customers. No one comes in to browse. Everything is done on line.'

It was a sad moment, the end of an era. I miss those rackety old shops and their bargain trays. But I still revisit them in dreams.

The earliest story I can recall writing was written when I was seven, and it was called 'The Old, Old Man.' Or maybe 'The Old, Old, Old Man.' I followed that reduplicative practice for emphasis in those days that I was to re-encounter in Wagga Wagga and Mooney Mooney. The old, old man was, as far as I can remember, a snowman who beat up the bad boys who have been tormenting the protagonist. A satisfying though simple narrative line. I wrote it in a spiral bound notebook and preserved it carefully. Fifty years later I presented it to Mitchell Library with the rest of my manuscripts and papers.

After that there is a break of seven years. And then there was the Physics class at school. I was gazing out of the window or into space, gazing anyway away from the theorem on the board. Mr Balchin, the Physics master seized on my abstraction.

'What are you thinking about?' he asked.

'Nothing, sir,' I replied, the normal reply to such demands.

'Then write me an essay about it,' said the master.

And that was the next initiating moment. Making something out of nothing. I launched into the task with delight. Hours of day-dreaming had provided me with lots of practice. I used all the resources of wit, paradox and irony that I could command. Growing up in that small, landlocked country town, creating something out of nothing seemed the only thing to do. In the desperate, stretching emptiness of those days, or what I perceived of as emptiness, it was the way to keep yourself amused, diverted, hopeful.

Oddly, it was the Physics master who prompted this experiment in creativity. By a strange dialectic, the Physics which I could not understand was the trigger for opening up an enthusiasm for writing. Later, my English masters encouraged me in my writing. But this other, alien, scientific subject had provided the provocation.

Creation out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, has its metaphysical tradition. I have never been much of a metaphysician, and it worried me, later, when I began to feel that writing should draw on observation and experience of reality, that nothingness should have been that initiating subject that persuaded me I could become a writer. As the years went on I felt more and more that writing should have substance, content. I still believe it should. But writing also requires that creative playfulness of making something out of nothing, a compensation for the emptiness of adolescent yearnings, or the tedium of school classrooms, or the abstractions of the theorems of the physical universe.

But it was not, of course, simply creation out of nothing. There was that sense of oppression by authority. Persecution, victimization would be to express it too strongly. But it was a conflict with forces more powerful than myself, and I chose to deal with the conflict by humour. Humour was a way of defusing the confrontation. A way, even, of appeasing the authority. And at the same time a way of laughing at it, subverting it. A contradictory and rather doomed enterprise, perhaps. But a way of reconstituting the conflict into something I could find more acceptable to live with. A re-aspirated example of what my colleague at the University of Sydney, Stephen Knight, discussing the 'Carry On'

movies, called 'the Ealing power of comedy.'

Books increasingly became a part of my life, my aspirations. Authorship the alternative to failure at woodwork, sport, physical prowess. I eagerly appropriated any evidences of the possibility of authorship for me, any contiguity or acquaintanceship with people who had written books. Uncle Jack had a collection of his sermons for children published, *Put in Your Hand*, and two or three more volumes followed. I proudly arranged them in prime position in the book case in the front room. It gave me a satisfaction that so many of the masters at school had written books: Mr Wormald a succession of Latin text books, Mr Giblin a chemistry text, Eric Orton a number of German ones, W. F. Wheeler a biology text or two, Captain Holland a specialist monograph on philately, Henry Sandon a monograph on Worcester porcelain, which later led to his role a ceramics expert on the BBC's *Antiques Roadshow*. The art and music master, A. T. Shaw, reviewed concerts for the local paper. Seeing my aspirations as a writer, he gave me an early edition of James Joyce's *Pomes Pennyeach*.

I once shared a session at a writers' festival with a particularly wretched specimen of a miserable Scots novelist, who sneeringly told our audience that he was not like those English writers who had been encouraged by their old schoolmaster. If I'd been his schoolmaster, I would not have encouraged him, either.

But it was my senior English master, Edgar Billingham, who did so much to encourage and help me. The English masters were all encouraging, Major Tasker, Jake Illingworth. But it was Bill, as he was always known, who was the dominant force. And this was not so much in his English classes, in which he exuded a considerable world-weariness and disillusion with teaching, but in his other activities, overseeing the school magazine, producing the school plays, and running the Adam Lindsay Gordon society, which met after school and in which neophyte writers tried out their poems and stories.

And Bill himself was a writer. Rummaging around the shelves of Cornish's department store in Birmingham with a friend from school, Ted Bolas, on a rare visit to our closest approximation to a big city, we discovered a pile of half a dozen copies of Bill's *Midland Poems* from the 1940s that had proved popular enough to go into a third printing. They were in the mode of A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. Bill used to point out to us that Housman was a Worcestershire poet; Shropshire was the somewhere else he yearned for, the next county, but he was born and went to school in Worcestershire.

Bill's *Midland Poems* contained some moving poems from World War I, in which Bill had served, though he is never represented in any of the anthologies of first world war poems. He said little about the war, other than having had to carry out the latrine buckets from the trenches in the frosty mornings. 'Never got chilblains,' he said, the splashed urine apparently a prophylactic against them.

He had a serial about a Midlands football team, *Up, the Barchester Rovers*, running on BBC radio. There was talk of a television version, but it came to nothing. In the late 1930s he had written a play about Shakespeare's legal entanglements with the Mountjoy family. It was scheduled for a London

production, but the outbreak of war, the blackouts, the blitz, put an end to that and it was never performed. Already, at the very outset of my literary career, I was introduced to its disappointments.

When I left school he gave me the two volume collection of Shakespeare documents that he had used to research the project. Two items were from the Worcester diocesan records, now listed as missing. I went down to the diocesan record office and found them. Easy enough, they were catalogued. One document was for the marriage of William Shakespeare to Anne Whateley of Temple Grafton. The other, dated a few weeks later, was for the marriage of William Shakespeare to Anne Hathaway of Stratford upon Avon with only one reading of the banns. There is no record of which marriage actually took place. Some commentators have claimed that Whateley was a misspelling of mishearing of Hathaway, but Temple Grafton could hardly be a misspelling of Stratford upon Avon. I wrote an article for *Berrows Worcester Journal* speculating that Shakespeare had planned to marry Anne Whateley, but a couple of Stratford heavies had got the later permission issued to ensure that he married Anne Hathaway, already pregnant, without delay. The sub-editor produced the banner headline, 'Did Shakespeare Ever Marry?' A couple of weeks later there was a rejoinder from Levi Fox, director of the Shakespeare memorial trust at Stratford. 'Disregard any recent reports you may have read about Shakespeare,' he instructed an assembly of Worcestershire women. Shakespeare was a very decent man, he assured them, and you would have welcomed him, or at least his daughter, into your house. I was a bit shaken by the response. But later I wrote a note on my rediscovery of the documents and sent it to *Notes and Queries*. One of my first academic publications.

It was Bill who came up with a scheme to get me out of the school and up to Oxford as soon as possible. I took the college entrance examination in the year before the final school examinations, the A levels. It would be good practice in examination technique, Bill said. The examinations were grouped – half a dozen colleges would combine and share them. Lincoln offered me an open exhibition. But Pembroke, which was in the same group, offered me an open scholarship, more prestigious. It seemed wanton to turn down the scholarship, but that was what I did. It made no financial difference: if you won a place you were awarded a state scholarship anyway, which covered your fees. You didn't end up financially better off with a scholarship, just endowed with more scholarly prestige. But since Bill had established that Wallace Robson, the English fellow at Lincoln, was held to be the best tutor in the faculty, and correctly so, it was to Lincoln I went.

Having won the exhibition, I had no need then to take the final A-level examinations. I could simply have left school. But I took them, just in case; just in case I failed somewhere along the line and ended up needing those qualifications. And then my headmaster got into the act and persuaded my parents that I should delay taking up my place for a year since I was young and since some of the undergraduates would be two or three years older than me, having chosen to do their military service before going up. National Service had only just been abolished and I missed it. Which was good. But these other manoeuvrings were more troubling. Should I have taken the scholarship? Should I have

gone up straight away? I messed around, staying at school for a pointless further term, trying to improve my Latin, editing the school magazine, the official one this time, and acting in the school play. I considered going to teach English in Germany but then backed out after the person I was replacing got in touch with me and said we should meet, there were certain things I should know. We didn't meet, but his communication disturbed me, so I turned down the position. Then I taught in a country primary school for a couple of terms to fill in time and accrue some money. It was a small school, just the headmistress and me. If the children became unruly I brought them to order by standing in front of the open fire, blocking the heat from them. The school was on the Spetchley estate of a Roman Catholic family, the Berkeleys. Elgar was said to have been inspired to write a movement in *The Dream of Gerontius* by an avenue of trees there. According to another story, Pugin had designed the school and schoolhouse building, but forgot to put in a staircase to the schoolhouse bedroom, so it had to be added later in the kitchen. I enjoyed my two terms there, I was far sadder to leave than I had been to leave the grammar school.

Oxford

I remember my uncle visiting me in my first term at Oxford. He took me for a walk round the university parks. As we re-emerged into the clutter of science buildings and research institutes that lay between us and the colleges closer to the centre he remarked how every time he returned to Oxford he found it more marvellous than ever. Or beautiful. Or splendid. One of those words.

I resisted, of course. It was all resistance at that time. Uncle Jack had been up at Oxford. Yet not really. He had taken his degree at Birmingham and then come to a theological college at Oxford to qualify for the ministry. The church, that is, not government. We did not come from the governing classes. And it was the Congregational church, not the established Church of England. Mansfield college today is a fully fledged college but at that time it wasn't. Not in his time thirty years earlier nor in my time. Then it was one of those peripheral institutions that clung to the university: Catholic missions, secretarial colleges, theological colleges, teachers' training institutes, extra-mural education. Within the university there were colleges and halls, and halls were deemed to be not really colleges. Theological colleges were halls or some even less accepted institution, recent, anyway, late nineteenth century or early twentieth century, not part of the great medieval heritage and authentic Gothic.

And so his claims of love for Oxford, his commitment and loyalty to it, were not quite right to me. He didn't really belong. And that, at that point, was the painful issue. Belonging. And if Uncle Jack did not belong, did I? I had won my exhibition and my state scholarship, I had my place in an authentically medieval college. But I felt an intruder. Oxford, or Cambridge, had been somewhere to aspire to at school. But when you got there you found, as you already knew and had never for a moment doubted, you came from the wrong school. I think in those years eighty per cent of undergraduates came from public schools, which of course were not public, they were private schools, charged fees, and were selective and exclusive in terms of whom they admitted. Those of us who had gone to truly public schools, named state schools to distinguish them, were a minority. We felt like intruders. No one told us we were intruders. But we did not have to be told. We did not have the network of school connections, those family traditions of belonging to this college or that college, and this was always apparent, because we did not speak with those public school accents.

Ah, the Oxford accent. D. H. Lawrence wrote a poem about it. He too was a product of the state school system. He attended, like my uncle, a provincial university, Nottingham, in those days not even a full, true university, but a university college. And he took a teachers' training course, not a degree course. I had read about that. I knew his feelings of exclusion. But this issue was not really the Oxford accent. That is what it was called, but in fact it was the public school accent, taught, or acquired, at those seats of privilege and wealth and future power, government and success. Those

undergraduates already had the Oxford accent before they arrived at Oxford. Prolepsis was the literary term: I had learned it studying Keats. 'So the two brothers and their murdered man,' he wrote, of the man yet to be murdered. The Oxford accent was something already acquired before arriving to fulfil your destiny. It was a mark of predestination.

I suppose I could have learned it. Mimicked it. Copied it. I suppose I could simply have acquired it, without putting any value terms into the means of acquisition. But that would have involved a rejection of my existing identity, while riven with doubt about whether I would ever be able, or allowed, to attain another one. And returning home in the vacations, would I address my parents in these new tones, meet my old school-friends with their regional accents, modified in various degrees, no doubt, but always detectable? And wouldn't my underlying regional accent always be detectable and reveal the falsity of the imperfectly acquired Oxford accent? And region, really, had nothing to do with it, that was how you spoke because that was where you had grown up, but you spoke like that because you had grown up working-class, or lower middle-class, because you were not part of the elite, the moneyed middle-class and upper-class whose offspring were educated at public schools where they learned to talk in that class based way.

So out of this sense of the impossibility of passing myself off as other than I was, I settled into a resentful acceptance of marginality, of being an intruder, there on some sort of sufferance. There was no way I could agree on the splendours that were Oxford, or the beauties that became only more beautiful on every encounter. I was there, encountering it every day, every hour, every minute, every second. Here were all, or many, of the treasures I had ever aspired to, but could they ever be mine? I had been admitted to the site of privilege and opportunity: but would there ever be opportunities for someone as underprivileged as I was? And if so, at what cost? Was success attainable other than by attempting to mutate into one of the elite I encountered all around me? And what would happen if I tried and failed, if the mutation remained incomplete and flawed, and the hairy heels were for ever on show, the accent slipping in crucial moments and revealing the shameful secret of being an interloper, an outsider at the feast, an ambitious proletarian. And the very term proletarian was a self-protective one, shifting oneself into a progressive class-analysis. Oicks or yobs were the usual terms.

I was all too acutely conscious of that great novel of exclusion from Oxford, Thomas Hardy's *Jude The Obscure*. It was a favourite of my father's. Like Jude Fawley, my father was a workingman denied access to higher education. Like Jude he had a fascination with learning, and for years studied philosophy and theology and literature at adult education classes. It was an especially poignant novel for me because it commemorated that exclusion that my father felt so bitterly. When in those later years of Jude's claim that 'they are making it easier for poor students now' I went up to Oxford, that sense of being an interloper, an intruder, an outsider, given an emotional underlining by the force of Hardy's novel, was always with me. The bitterness of the injustices done to my father and thousands upon thousands like him was always present.

Jude is the one great English novel that gives expression to some of the horrors of English class society, that refuses to have the topic quietly swept away. In this it stands as a landmark in the development of English fiction. The radical challenge of Hardy's vision of Christminster, as he calls Oxford, is consistent. 'For a moment there fell on Jude a true illumination; that here in the stone yard was a centre of effort as worthy as that dignified by the name of scholarly study within the noblest of the colleges.' The value of manual work is consistently asserted: the contempt with which manual workers are treated is shown time and time again. 'He was a young workman in a white blouse, and with stone-dust in the creases of his clothes; and in passing him they did not even see him, or hear him, rather saw through him as through a pane of glass at their familiars beyond.' Continually Hardy represents these class separations. 'He saw that his destiny lay not with these, but among the manual toilers in the shabby purlieus which he himself occupied, unrecognised as part of the city at all by its visitors and panegyrists, yet without whose denizens the hard readers could not read nor the high thinkers live.' It would be hard to be more explicit than that. But Hardy's presentation of the injustices is inexorable. Sue Bridehead says to Jude: "'You are one of the very men Christminster was intended for when the colleges were founded; a man with a passion for learning, but no money, or opportunities, or friends. But you were elbowed off the pavement by the millionaires' sons.'" As Jude announces in his spontaneous speech on Remembrance Day, "'I perceive there is something wrong somewhere in our social formulas.'"

I have never been convinced that the uproar greeting the publication of *Jude* was solely a response to the exploration of sexuality. Certainly sexuality was a component, and Hardy's representation of sexuality was challenging and disturbing. But his presentation of the class system, of a society built on oppression and exclusion was even more challenging and disturbing. *Jude* stands out in English fiction for the starkness of its portrayal of class division. There is no amelioration, there is no softening of the attack by the presentation of a positive bourgeois world. The recognition of the class nature of English society, of its irreducible and intransigent viciousness, is uncompromising.

It has always been possible to find a way to write about sexuality. But to combine sexuality with an attack on the foundations of class society, to question the capitalist model, always results in denunciation. This was what D. H. Lawrence discovered when *The Rainbow* was banned, and what drove him to spend his life in exile. The same denunciatory pattern persisted in that early text of the women's movement, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, where the novelists singled out for their unacceptable sexual attitudes - Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer - were all writers offering an anti-bourgeois critique of the social order.

I am not attempting to play down Jude's self-confessed 'weakness for womankind and ... impulse to strong liquor'. Some of the most striking and dramatic episodes in the novel deal with those themes. But the aspect that always uniquely characterises *Jude the Obscure* for me is the theme of class, of the exclusions and injustices on the basis of class, and on the waste of human ability that the system perpetrates. This is the aspect that Thomas Hardy himself drew attention to, the aspect obscured by the

attack on the novel's presentation of sexuality. As Hardy wrote in his 'Postscript' to the 'Preface': 'In my own eyes the sad feature of the attack was that the greater part of the story - that which presented the shattered ideals of the two chief characters, and had been more especially, and indeed almost exclusively, the part of interest to myself - was practically ignored by the adverse press of the two countries ...' This was the aspect that made *Jude* such an unforgettable, such a painful, and such a rewarding reading experience. It was not something I could forget.

There were some thirty colleges composing the university at that time I was there. Five were women's colleges, the rest were men's. A couple were for postgraduates only. And All Souls, that symbol of establishment privilege, had no undergraduates or postgraduates at all, just fellows. There was a ranking in all this, as in everything in England. There were colleges where most, if not all, the undergraduates came from Eton or Winchester or wherever. There were two or three where a substantial proportion came from state schools or what were called minor public schools. The rest of them were mixed, of mixed status, mixed intake.

I had chosen mine, or it had been chosen for me, on the basis of its English tutor. My English master, Edgar Billingham, had asked Freddie Bateson, who had taught a summer school he had recently attended, for advice. Bateson recommended Wallace Robson, the English fellow at Lincoln, as the best English tutor. Bateson himself taught at Corpus Christi, but was never made a college fellow. As soon as he retired, however, the college created a fellowship in English. Such were the feuds and resentments. Perhaps Bateson had provoked some of them; a committed socialist, during the war he had been in charge of Ministry of Agriculture land appropriation in Oxfordshire, and had annoyed more than a few land-owners. He founded and edited the journal *Essays in Criticism*, which at that time represented the progressive aspect of literary criticism. Later he published a couple of articles that I wrote: I treasured a postcard I received from him. 'Keep up the good work,' it said; then, in brackets, '(Of political education.)' The picture was of a windmill at Brill, where he lived. I suspected some wry *Don Quixote* allusion

Colleges were communities. They were the organizing focus of your life, where you lived and ate and were taught. Breakfast and lunch you came and went when you liked, self-service. Dinner, Hall as it was called, was at a set time and we dined together. Hall involved certain traditions, like not mentioning a woman's name and never talking about work. In some colleges failure to observe these conventions along with other social errors resulted in sconceing, being compelled to down a large volume of college beer in one long swallow. Rumours of death or disablement from alcoholic poisoning circulated. Lincoln, to my relief, no longer observed the practice.

The preceding two years of undergraduates had their established groups, their friendships and alliances. Each year's new intake of freshmen had to make their own. This is where the public school and state school divide asserted itself. There were other divides: there were the sporting types, the

rowing men, the rugger buggers, the cricketers: they tended to stick together. For a while people reading the same subject stuck together, but competitiveness and rivalry would soon break up those groupings. Scientists tended to preserve longer alliances: but that was largely because most of the scientists were provincial grammar school boys, bright working class youths lacking the easy confidence and charm of the public school types. It was not only a matter of class, it was also a matter of being provincial, of not knowing London, let alone Europe. The public school undergraduates may have spent their schooldays in remote places, but they all knew London, had all visited the continent. My parents had never been to London in their life. I had been there once.

It was to the grammar school undergraduates that I drifted, sat with at dinner or breakfast or lunch. There would be the occasional public school person who joined us: one, I remember, had spent a year working on a kibbutz; another, an Etonian, had spent a year jackarooing in Australia. There would be the occasional American, already graduated, but taking an undergraduate course again for the prestige of an Oxford degree. Looking back I realize all these were probably Jewish. Being Jewish at an English public school, or in parts of America, and being American in Britain, produced a feeling of not belonging, of exclusion, or outsider status, of marginality, comparable to being provincial working-class or grammar school. As for blacks or South-East Asians or Indians, they were very few: this was 1960. Things were not much changed from the 1920s when the hearties used to assemble outside Balliol and shout, 'Bring out your black man.' But there was now an anti-apartheid university club, the Joint Action Committee against Racial Intolerance, Jacari. In the evenings at the beginning of each term you would often get a knock on your door and someone would try and recruit you to join this or that club. A Welshman told me how the Jacari rep had knocked on his door.

'Come in,' said the Welshman, in his Welsh accent.

'Oh Gawd,' said the recruiter against racial intolerance, 'not another bloody Welshman.'

Much of all this was a matter of self-selection. What, or who, you felt easy with. I didn't feel easy at all. There was no explicit discrimination. No obvious exclusion. But there again, you knew your place. Or felt you did. You didn't, or I didn't, apply for membership of exclusive dining clubs. You avoided putting yourself in hurtful or humiliating situations. The humiliation was all self-administered: you made your own assessment of how others would see you.

I didn't join the university Conservative club, for instance. I didn't join the Labour club either, for that matter. The latter, which politically I believed I was more aligned to, nonetheless seemed too public school for me. I was always conscious of being too working class. It was full of eloquent political sophisticates who would go on to become parliamentarians and cabinet ministers. Just like the Conservative club. These were the playgrounds of the natural leaders: natural leaders were those from famous families who had gone to public school. 'Not for the likes of us' as my mother used to say. So I kept away, frightened, intimidated, inadequate. It was a matter of how you saw yourself. And how you saw yourself was a matter of how you had been brought up, how your fears and anxieties and insecurities intimidated and paralysed you, what your nightmares were.

So my initial self-defeating response to Oxford was that I did not belong there. Well, I was there, wasn't I? Yes, I was there physically, in the room beneath the roof, overlooking the church whose bells rang out endlessly, eternally. There I was, one small, mortal, finite, temporary intrusion.

The man across the corridor knocked on my door and asked me about rowing. I was overawed. By the size, the presence, the accent, the assurance, the geniality, the certainty, the force of him, and said yes. I had rowed at school, and badly: and I had only done that because I was worse at cricket. I don't know what possessed me to agree. Later in the week I came to my senses and found some feeble, unpersuasive, unsound excuse why I couldn't fulfil my agreement. Failed in one. I expected to be thrown into the fountain and my rooms to be wrecked, according to lore and the novels I had, if not read, had described to me. But the college had no fountain and nothing happened. The man across the corridor still spoke to me on the stairs. Though less warmly, I was sure. Sure that there would be less warmth, that was what I perceived. Encountering him on the staircase became one of those vaguely shameful certainly uneasy experiences that would make up so much of Oxford life. Visiting the Thai novelist Pira Sudham some thirty five years later, I found a review of one of Pira's books quoted at the end of the text: it was by my rowing club neighbour, Bradley Winterton, now living in Hong Kong.

There was no point in concealing my origins. A large part of the corpus of English literature was devoted to exposing people who had done that. Tried to do that. They were always ignominiously exposed. It was a word that existed for just that case: ignominiously. It reverberated in my head as the bells rang out and the man across the corridor thundered up and down the stairs.

Some of my contemporaries from school began carefully to learn the Oxford accent. It was the appropriate time, away from home, away from the down-dragging quicksands of origins. You would at the same time have to learn a new set of values, accept, even embrace, conservatism. Some of my contemporaries had already done that at school. Anyway, what new set? What values could be more conservative than my parents' values? It was hard to imagine any. Wouldn't a transition from working-class Tory to middle-class Tory have been simple? It would, it would indeed, but I refused it. I would inevitably be caught out, my origin would be discovered. I clung to my origins so that it could never be said I was denying them. Fear of the new helped motivate me. That quintessential provincial conservatism, the huge negation. Better stay in the wretchedness in which you began than find something better. Better would only turn out to be worse.

I talked to Ted Bolas, a rural proletarian from school, now reading Geography at Wadham. What could be more proletarian than reading Geography at Wadham? We dragged ourselves back down. Why should I have to betray my parents? But of course I did. The last thing my parents wanted was an undergraduate son proclaiming proletarian socialism. It affronted my mother's hierarchical system. Queen and country. Lords. County families. England. My championship of the lower orders was unwelcome. They had hoped I would escape the class trap, make something of myself, be, if not

a gentlemen, at least a success. And there I was, betraying it all.

As always, or certainly from this point, I felt I was neither one thing or another, offered a scholarship at one college I turned it down to take an exhibition at another one. Now I was up, I had to buy the appropriate gown. Sumptuary laws. One gown for scholars, another for commoners. But what about exhibitioners, somewhere in between? Was there a gown for them. No one seemed to know. Wouldn't a scholar's gown seem fraudulent? And a commoner's inappropriate?

A scout, or was it the under porter, some weaselly figure, sold me one. I soon realised it was unique, a misshapen, cut-down scholar's gown, that had lost the larger part of its fabric. Neither one thing nor the other. It had the fluted shoulders of the scholar's gown, but came to an end in the middle of my back, like a commoner's. No one else in the entire university was wearing anything like it. When I went to the matriculation ceremony, I stood at the back so no one would see this grotesque thing I had been sold. First introduction to the swindling of college servants. And it was always there, this ridiculous item I had to wear to tutorials and lectures and halls, a reminder of being swindled, of being a sucker, and that was hard to be reminded of, *amour propre* at that age demanding you made no mistakes. And always rather ridiculous. And I could not afford to buy another one. And again, I still did not know if I should be wearing a scholar's gown or a commoner's. These public distinctions. There were no exhibitioners' gowns, were there? No one ever seemed to be able to answer these things. You were supposed to know. The public school boys with their family traditions knew, or seemed to know, or purported to know. It was very much a matter of being knowing, projecting knowingness, whether you knew anything or not. The lesson of Oxford. But I didn't know that for a long time. A matter of carrying it off. By the end of it all I could. The absurd gown became an object of familiarity if not affection. It became my romantic icon, the scholarly genius uncaring about his abbreviated gown, affecting it as a literary bohemian dandyism almost, something by which I stood out from the crowd, even if absurdly, but in this context – and most undergraduates treated their gowns as an impediment, a nuisance, as something drawing unwelcome attention to themselves in the streets as they walked or bicycled between lectures and tutorials and libraries, where the wearing of gowns was enforced – its absurdity could only be a positive one. I told myself.

What did I do with it finally? Sell it on to the porter again? To disturb some future generation of insecure freshmen?

The mythic wars were between the hearties and the aesthetes or the studious. The hearties were the sporting types, the muddied oafs and flannelled fools who seemed to spend all the time they were not on the playing fields lounging around the porter's lodge, so you had to pass them whenever you went in or out of college, feeling their superiority, their assurance, their arrogance, their contempt. Yet there were never any confrontations at Lincoln. There may have been no reason for my fears, but fearful I was. There were stories of drunken hearties celebrating boat race wins by throwing grammar

school boys or aesthetes into the Christ Church fountain, with hideous results: concussion, paralysis, death. There was the story that some sporting types put a pig into the rooms of the English fellow at Keble, John Carey – not, I think, because his lectures were indubitably boring but because he was also dean or some other authority figure, responsible for handing out fines. The pig made a terrible mess, shitting, crashing around.

One boat race night I bumped into two friends from Oriel. We had met on the staff of *Isis*, the undergraduate magazine. They were grammar school, with northern accents. They were keeping out of college, wandering around the Oxford streets, for fear the college hearties would come and attack them and smash up their rooms once they had got suitably drunk. These sort of things happened. They never happened to me, I am relieved to say. But there was always that fear, that uncertainty. At some point someone was going to say, you don't belong here, and then it would all start. It didn't. But there was always the fear that it might.

So Jack and Geoff and I went to a pub and spent the evening there. Then they came back with me to my college, figuring they would return to Oriel when things had quietened down. The only problem with this was that the college gates were locked at eleven p.m. After that you had to climb in or out, through the adjacent graveyard and over a spiked fence. Fearful stories circulated about people falling and being impaled on the spikes and paralysed for life. It was all part of that traditional Oxford that we held in contempt. The sort of thing that prevented my agreement with my uncle's ever incrementally increasing love of Oxford. The way into the graveyard was through a bathroom window. Geoff stepped on a washbasin to ease his way out, and it came away from the wall and water sprayed everywhere.

In the morning I went to the Dean and admitted my responsibility. The Dean, the classicist John Sullivan, appreciated my coming forward spontaneously and fined me two pounds. I had hoped stepping forward like that would have been enough. Two pounds was a significant amount of money. You could buy eight or ten Penguin paperbacks for two pounds. But he was a kindly person. On another occasion, walking through the quadrangle with a late visitor, heading for the graveyard, I saw a group of people at the porter's lodge, one of them opening the gates. It was the dean, letting out a female visitor. He let out whoever had been visiting me. 'Don't tell your Dean,' he said.

There were various grades of outsiderdom. Attending grammar school was one. Being working class was another. Not all grammar school students were working class. Indeed most were provincial middle class, or London middle class for that matter. Within this category, class distinction and prejudice were as rife as ever. The scientists I sat with in Hall were a mixture of southern English lower middle class and northern proletarian. Sometimes the northern proletarians became too clinging, lost in this world of privilege, their physical features proclaiming their lack of privileged upbringing, their lack of adequate food, their more hangdog bearing, along with their unstylish clothes. One time I remember trying to shake off one if not two of them when heading out for a drink:

you could feel dragged down by these not especially cultured or informed or attractive dependents, bored by their narrow focus on physics or chemistry, their lack of a larger political or cultural vision. It was not very admirable behaviour, but it happened. Once, anyway. The hurt on the faces of the two we had tried to escape by dodging up staircase, doubling back along corridors, was palpable.

As an exhibitioner I was expected to read the lesson in chapel. Despite my proclaimed atheism, I had quite enjoyed doing that at school assembly, standing at the lectern in front of the assembled seven hundred boys, intoning from the Bible. I did it once at college when my name came up on the list, but that was the only time I went to chapel. Presumably I asked to be exempted in future, like most people. The chaplain was a white-haired red-faced historian, Vivian Green, who lived in college. I always felt uneasy encountering him in the quadrangle or the porter's lodge. I never got to know him, yet he seemed always to be dashing here and there, rather baby-faced, always gowned. Years later, reading his obituary in the *Weekly Telegraph,* I discovered that he had been 'outed', as they put it, as the model for John le Carré's fictional spymaster, Smiley.

I never met most of the college fellows. There was no occasion to do so. If they were involved in extra-curricular activities, those were not the activities that involved me. Early on there was a sherry party for freshmen given by the Rector, as the head of the college was called. I stuck with the proletarians I knew and managed to avoid meeting the Rector. He had taught at one of those famous public schools before becoming Rector and had his former pupils round to tea. Or so we believed. I had had enough problems relating to the headmaster of my own school: they all, headmaster and Rector, got subsumed into some conglomerated figure of upper-class authority, privilege, exclusion and I made sure I stayed excluded. I got horribly drunk on the sherry and had no recollection of how I got back to my rooms. The proletarians claimed to have carried me. I hoped I hadn't insulted anyone, confronted some figure of privilege or authority and let loose my fears and resentments, but I had no memory of any of it. Something else to feel uneasy about, skulking through the porter's lodge, scurrying through the quadrangle, running up the stairs to my rooms. 'You might have gone out and raped somebody,' the Welshman said. Being proletarian, grammar school and Welsh he was very low on the pecking order, but he had learned to prey on people's anxieties. I let him borrow my bicycle since he claimed to have helped carry me back. It was a second-hand wreck I had, to some degree, attempted to restore. No point in having a good bicycle that would only get stolen. This certainly was not a good bicycle. The front fork had rusted and it collapsed while the Welshman was riding it and he dislocated his shoulder. I raised the issue of compensation and he raised the possibility of suing me. I would see him round college, his arm suspended in a white sling, something else to be uneasy about.

Sundays were the worst of days. On a rainy Sunday afternoon there was never much to do as an undergraduate in Oxford. The libraries, the Bodleian and the Radcliffe Camera, were closed on

Saturday afternoons and evenings and all day Sunday. There was always the college library but it was cold and gloomy and seemed mainly to be filled with eighteenth century sermons, heavy leather-bound volumes that offered little for the comparatively recently introduced study of English literature. Not many people used it. You could, of course, just sit in your room and read and write your essays or do your translation from Old English. But it was lonely. You could work on your own for a while, and then you felt the need of company, or even the mere sight of human society, other people working, talking existing. But the shops were shut, the pubs and cinemas kept restricted hours. There was the Junior Common Room where you could read the Sunday papers, except that you never felt especially at ease there, unless there were people you knew, and most of the time there weren't. The Pitt Rivers museum was one of the few places open. I often went there. The building itself was one of the first in Britain to be constructed from iron. It was an icon, a nineteenth century vision of knowledge, an exhibit in itself, full of all the ghoulish spoils of Empire – bows and arrows, shrunken heads, poison darts, stuffed wild life, pots and bones, all in their nineteenth-century Gothic cases. The remaining possibility was to go for a walk. Generally I would end up seeking out one of the grammar school undergraduates and we would walk round the Parks, or the Meadows, or Port Meadow, maybe taking in the Pitt Rivers museum on the way. It was exercise, that was something. It provided a sort of companionship against the ever encroaching loneliness. It was a chance to talk, about politics, society, sex. Ah, sex! At this time there were six male undergraduates in residence for every one female. The balance was somewhat restored by nurses and girls from the secretarial colleges, quasi-finishing schools for the middle-class who could thus say their daughter was up at Oxford. I met one or two at parties arranged for the purpose of meeting them. But nothing much came of these nervous encounters, other than unease and embarrassment.

The routines disrupted, Sunday was the reminder of the indissoluble loneliness that pervaded Oxford. After these lugubrious walks we would come back to our rooms and browse through the Sunday papers and drink instant coffee and eat chocolate digestive biscuits. For years I could no longer eat them: for a while I thought it was the chocolate or the sugar content or the fat or the wheat or the preservatives that upset my stomach: now I suspect it was the triggered memory of those Oxford Sundays that wrenched my stomach so painfully.

I decided that college was not the arena in which I wanted to act. It was too small and the forces of convention too strong: tradition, sport, public schools, chapel, middle-class conformity. It was not a world I could see myself easily becoming part of. One of the grammar school fellow diners was an economist called Dave Pearce, from Harrow, the place, not the public school. He had been so pleased at coming up that he had bought a college blazer, replete with embroidered badge on the breast pocket. He wore it to Hall once but we never saw it again. It was absolutely the sort of thing one didn't wear. Scarves and ties in the college colours were perhaps allowable. I bought both. But those who truly belonged had no need to assert their belonging with such insignia; they were terribly *infra*

dig. Dave was a leftist, a one time Marxist but already he seemed to be going beyond Marx, maybe an early example one of those so-called post-Marxists who repudiated Marx. But despite the blazer he never became a college man. He was told at some interview, some college formality where one's progress was being assessed, that apparently he did not row with the college boat.

'It depends which way the boat's going,' he said.

Not, we felt, our way. The college was for the conformists and the conventional and the comfortably satisfied, I concluded. But the university offered larger possibilities.

I went for an audition with OUDS, the Oxford University Dramatic Society. At school I had played Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* a young officer in *Journey's End,* the Dauphin in an act of *Saint Joan,* and something else quite substantial which I forget now in *The Lady's Not for Burning*. OUDS gave me a couple of lines as an attendant lord or second soldier in whatever it was they were auditioning for. Once again I backed out. I could not see myself progressing to stardom from a couple of lines. Anyway, theatre and performance were less important to me than writing.

There were two regular weekly publications edited and written by undergraduates. One was in tabloid newspaper format, *Cherwell*; the other was a weekly magazine much like the current *Spectator* in format: the same packed columns of print, the same mix of articles, reviews, poems. Tabloid newspapers were frowned on by my parents, too vulgar and rubbishy. I saw my future as a writer, a novelist, not a journalist. And if I was going to be involved in journalism it was to be what used to be called the higher journalism, informed commentary on serious issues, book reviews, that sort of thing. So I went along to the meeting for new staff of *Isis.* I cannot remember the name of the editor. That term's *Isis* was all very hierarchical and privileged and pompous. New staff were tried out with news reporting. News reporting was not chasing sensationalism like *Cherwell,* but covering the meetings of the various university societies to which quite distinguished people were invited to speak. I reported on an account of the bizarre Cutteslowe Wall episode in North Oxford, in which a street had been closed off by a seven foot high, spiked brick wall to separate the council houses of the proletariat at one end from middle-class home-owners at the other. I covered F. R. Leavis on D. H. Lawrence, stressing that he was really a puritan. The reports generally got published, five hundred to seven hundred word items. I was not commissioned to write one of the substantial articles. I submitted a short story but it was rejected.

The editor changed each term. In my second term Paul Foot was appointed. He was a crusading left-winger and spent the rest of his life as a radical journalist. I resubmitted my short story, about a ban the bomb march in the Midlands I had attended, and the unease with which I had attended it – my parents far from approving, if in fact they knew. He accepted it and gave me more interesting news assignments. I never really got to know him, but I remember him with affection and gratitude: he was kind to me at a time of my deepest insecurities. His father had been governor of Cyprus, his uncle was the left wing Labour parliamentarian Michael Foot. He came from a privileged background, yet always espoused the progressive. The very fact that someone like him acknowledged my existence

had a profound effect on me.

He ran a campaign about the quality of university lecturers, which resulted in a report assessing them, pointing out their inadequacies. The news staff was sent out to cover the ground. There was widespread feeling that the dons resented undergraduates as a nuisance interfering with their research or their port drinking. Foot's campaign was to make them take more care over their teaching. The university authorities were unwelcoming of his initiative. Their response was that if a lecture seemed incoherent and ill formulated, undergraduates should realize how privileged they were to encounter ideas at their very moment of gestation and development. I reported on Christopher Ricks' lectures on Milton, a compulsory author for Prelims, the examinations at the end of second term; they saw publication a couple of years later as his ground-breaking study *Milton's Grand Style*. I think I was positive about them. They were excellent on the subtleties of Milton's language, though had nothing to say about the revolutionary radical politics. I reviewed the book in *Isis* at the end of my final year, in a rather smart-arse way, which provoked a somewhat annoyed letter from Ricks.

There were weekly news meetings in which assignments were handed out, and where suggestions for other news stories were made. At the end of one of them a girl came up to me and said, 'You seem like a clever young man.' Or something like that. It was delivered with one of those cracking Cheltenham Ladies College accents. I bridled. It was the sort of thing, and said in the sort of way, that I readily interpreted as upper-class condescension, even a warning about aspiring out of my station in life. But that was not its intent. Perhaps Paul Foot had commented favourably on one of my pieces, drawing me to her attention. Once I got over my defensiveness I realized she was friendly. And attractive. She was writing film reviews and running into difficulties. Maybe one hadn't been printed, or had been cut. I seem to recall she asked for my help. Anyway, asked or not, I offered it. Maybe she just wanted company at the cinema, not wanting to go along and sit there on her own. Whatever, I was glad of the chance of a free ticket. We began working on the reviews together, whether or not that was what she had intended.

She was a year ahead of me, in her second year. That was one of those gulfs hard to cross in those days. A man might possibly go out with a girl a year or two below him: but a year ahead – it was like going out with an older woman, not the done thing. And to add to my inhibitions, she came from a distinguished family. Her great uncle Harold Laski had been one of the founders of the LSE and a famous left winger. Her aunt, Marghanita Laski was a novelist, and a reviewer for the quality press. I was both terrified and attracted, fearful and delighted. She knew gossip about the stars of Oxford and the literary world, about how Elizabeth Jane Howard was having an affair with Kingsley Amis, and how Laurie Lee liked three in a bed.

Her cousin was also up at Oxford, active in left wing clubs, nuclear disarmament, one of the beautiful people radicals. She seemed very exotic to me. But this is merely an impression. I barely met her, just saw her, maybe in libraries, at meetings. The New Left was too full of beautiful people for me. It came down to a very real issue of poverty. Well, I had not grown up in poverty. But there

was no spare money. What there was, my father was very tight with. As a result, I did not even own a pair of jeans. Jeans in 1960 Britain were not standard wear. You had to be an aficionado of *la nouvelle vague* or John Ford movies, or a London cosmopolitan public school radical. The sort of people who had no eyes for the likes of me. The New Left had their own magazine, *New University*, and looked down on *Isis* as conventional and untheoretical and empirical from their ultra-radical heights. These days I have come to suspect that the prefix new marks an agenda anything but radical, and generally signals a subversion of socialism from within. But at the time they were terribly modish. It was strange, when I came to think it over, and I did come to think it over, since sex and class were in the forefront of my thinking at that time, and for many years later, it was strange that Jenny who seemed the more conservative, the more conventionally upper middle class Cheltenham Ladies College type, was in fact the one who crossed the class lines. Her cousin seemed to remain firmly and unapproachably within the radical elite. It was a world to which Paul Foot clearly had access, but he was not identified with it: he used its contacts, just as he used his other establishment contacts, but I never felt he or Jenny was exclusive in the way I felt the New Left and Labour club worlds were. But then, since I felt those worlds exclusive I never got to know them, so what I write about them may be quite wrong. It may be yet another case of self-exclusion. Whatever it was, Jenny reached across that gulf. Writing this now I was about to put, 'and I was grateful'. Certainly that is what I feel now, thinking about it in retrospect. But was it what I felt then? It may have been. I don't know. But it quite well could have been. Grateful to have been acknowledged, grateful to have been spoken to across the class divide, grateful not to have been snubbed.

There were two cinemas in Oxford that specialized in showing foreign films, the Moulin Rouge at Headington, an inconvenient bus ride out of the city, and another one in Walton street, within walking distance. This was the time French new wave movies were arriving in art-house in Britain: Godard, Truffaut, Franju, Chabrol. Along with re-runs of an earlier generation of directors like Renoir and Dassin and René Clair and Bresson. And the new Italian cinema from Antonioni and de Sica and Fellini. At the same time the critical judgments from *Cahiers du Cinema* were entering circulation, giving some American directors *auteur* status: Preminger, Hitchcock, John Ford, John Huston, Joseph Losey, Samuel Fuller. Oxford was a fortunate place to be. The English magazine *Movie* began there and some of its endorsements continued in another magazine, *Oxford Opinion.*

Once in a while back at home on vacation I might go to the local cinema to see some alleged masterpiece that had slipped through – Renoir's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* or Fuller's *Merrill's Marauders.* My bicycle lamp was stolen on one such occasion. Bicycle lamp thieves. I should have detached it and taken it with me into the cinema: more expectation of parental disapproval, as if going to the cinema were not bad enough in itself. Bicycle lamps cost money and I never seemed to have much. But such exposure to interesting movies was rare in the provinces. The extra-curricular cinematic education I received in those three years at Oxford was considerable and I gratefully carried

it, and built on it, through later years.

At the same time there was a revival in British cinema: Schlesinger, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson, Lindsay Anderson. All, or at least some, of the repressed tensions of the class war began to surface in movies that seemed exciting and new and pertinent and for the first time relevant. There was I beginning to live these themes of upward mobility, experiencing those tensions across the class lines, to say nothing of the tensions of sexuality.

It was a heady mixture of sex and class. This was the world to which the middle class had access, movies in foreign languages, a knowledge of croissants and coffee drunk from a bowl and baguettes and wines. But I could profess a familiarity with canal towpaths and provincial pubs and fish and chip shops and regional accents. Between us Jenny and I could claim to cover the ground. For the first time the visual arts began to enter my life. I got ideas on how to decorate my rooms, on the sort of cultural baggage to have on display. There must have been a shop that sold reproduction paintings of great art works, posters you could tack onto your walls. I bought a painting by Goya. I don't know whether I bought it before I met Jenny or after. But it was her. It was an extraordinary likeness. I pinned it up in my room. I kept it for years.

Traditionally the retiring editor of *Isis* nominated his successor. Paul Foot nominated Grey Gowrie. The crusading radical socialist nominated the Etonian aristocrat. Such were the mysteries of the ruling class. Mysteries to me. Though not unexpected.

Aristocrats were not something of which I had any personal knowledge, other than hearing my aunt's adulation of them and my father's scathing counterblasts about the idle rich. My mother's position was something else again. Her father had worked for one, and she accepted the social order and its valuations. But occasionally she would recall how she told Lord Hindlip what a disgrace it was their house was so damp and her father so ill with rheumatism. The Hindlips were brewing lords, Allsopp's ale. Commemorated in verse by the Worcestershire poet Charles Stuart Calverley:

'O beer! O Hodgon, Allsopp, Bass!

'Names that should be on every infant's tongue.'

'Oh, Charlie Allsopp, what a drip,' said Jenny.

Anyway, Grey, 2nd earl of Gowrie. To complicate things he was an aesthetic aristocrat. Literary and languid.

'Oh Gawd, what a bloody business,' was his usual expression. He would sprawl at his editorial desk and run his hands through his hair.

His editorial staff all parodied him.

'Oh Gawd, what a bloody business.'

Those who mocked him most were fellow Etonians. No doubt they felt secure. It was they who stuck galley proofs of his poems on the office wall, with annotations. They who initiated the hourly parodies. They could catch the accent more precisely, of course. It was they who remarked on his

markedly un-Anglo-Saxon appearance. A goulash of racial genes, or was that Noel Picarda, one of the Union speakers. The phrase came from Mike Beloff, a fellow Etonian anxious about his own Jewishness. Jews I would have said I was as unfamiliar with as aristocrats, though there had been Gordon Reece at school, and the family doctor, and a family in the street who had been evacuated from London in the war, I realise now, who were generally thought to be gypsies. Gypsies were familiar, coming round selling clothes pegs, working in the picking fields. 'No cider, no gypsies,' some of the Worcester pubs announced in their window.

'Hold it there,' said Gowrie. 'Don't move.'

He was languishing behind the editorial desk examining his new Land camera, Polaroid, instant, large, menacing.

'Your hands,' he said.

Oh Gawd, did I have dirty nails?

He shot them.

I sat there self-consciously, blushing, hands clasped together.

We waited for the print to develop.

Gowrie studied it for a while.

'Marvellous,' he said.

The hands? The technology? The aesthetic innovation, a Warhol *avant le snap*? He passed it across. I would have preferred him to have kept it in his portfolio to display to posterity. But I took it. Preserved it for years. A black and white study that gradually faded, the hands immersing beneath the prismatic tints of an oil spill.

Gowrie held a luncheon party in his rooms. It was the only luncheon party I ever went to. Reading the biographies of establishment writers of the twenties, many years later, I found that such luncheon parties were the thing. In the twenties. Perhaps in Gowrie's milieu they still were. Though what Gowrie's milieu at Oxford was, other than the *Isis,* was not something I ever knew.

The editorial staff milled about Gowrie's rooms, a rather splendid set on the ground floor looking out, even opening out, it seemed, on some secluded lawn. If I had not known it before I realised it then, that there was a system behind the allocation of room in the colleges. Having a title clearly entitled you to the best.

Gowrie reclined on a couch and held forth. But his staff was a rabble, a crew of misfits and deserters and proletarians like Jack and Geoff and me. He should have been wearing an eye-patch and a bandanna. Books were scattered around everywhere, many of them review copies he had appropriated without reviewing them. Some of them were re-appropriated, along with some of his own books, first editions, signed copies from literary figures he knew in London. He was always off to London for literary parties or assignations.

'The only person I know who takes a prophylactic shot of penicillin before a dirty weekend,' claimed Beloff.

Gowrie spent an anguished week in the office, asking everyone if they had taken his first edition *Animal Farm* or his signed whatever, and would they return them. They never did. It was the only luncheon party he gave for his staff.

Shortly afterwards he was rusticated. For spending too many weekends away or having women in his rooms or something, whatever they rusticated you for in those days.

After that he used to drive down from London to the Headington roundabout and hand over his editorial to one of the staff at the Oxford city limits. Rustication prohibited his closer ingress. The staff member would then bicycle or catch the bus back into Oxford. And Gowrie would roar off in his Alvis to an assignation in Swansea or a literary occasion in town.

'Swansea, really!' Beloff would gasp.

Gowrie's *Isis* became notorious for its harbouring of the proletarian. Harbouring rather than promotion. But there we were, Jack, Geoff and me, elevated to the rank of feature writers, writing articles about being working class in Oxford, expressing our alienation, our sense of exclusion, our innermost insecurities. Maybe not the way to get ahead. It was at exactly that moment the Rector of my college gave an interview in the *Times,* maybe even wrote an article, announcing there was no class feeling at Oxford. Well, I never met him, did I? Not on the invitation list to the afternoon teas or select luncheons the rector gave for the former pupils from the public school of which he had been Rector. A famous one, it should no doubt be added.

But why acknowledge that ranking, why concede that fame? That was what we were doing in Gowrie's *Isis,* wasn't it, refusing to concede the privilege of the privileged? Or were we in fact confirming it by announcing our own exclusions? Gowrie's motives were never known. He was hardly a man of the left. Later he became Conservative Minister for the Arts under Mrs Thatcher. He achieved his moment of national notoriety when he issued a press statement that one could not live in Central London on £35,000 a year, and resigned.

'Oh Gawd, Mike, what a bloody business, I'm absolutely broke, lend me a fiver, would you?'

That was what you did at Oxford, that was why you went there, to lend titled figures fivers. It was never returned. But you wouldn't expect it to be. That was part of a university education.

Perhaps from his lordly heights Gowrie felt it all anthropologically interesting. Perhaps he felt alienated as an aristocrat and saw something kindred in the plight of the proletariat, as distantly above the confident middle classes as I felt beneath them.

The weekly magazine put out by the right wing social satirists, *Parson's Pleasure*, found this titled patronage of proletarians most amusing and took regular swipes at us. I was relieved to be subsumed into an ampersand: 'Waterhouse, Varley, &c,' they sneered. I stood by my proclaimed proletarianism but did not want to be swamped by it, did not want to be sneered at for it, did not want to be permanently trapped in it. It was not my only identity. I wanted to be a writer, to publish stories, poems, novels. I did

not want to be a journalist only writing feature articles. It was just that it was easier to get articles into print than stories, particularly if they had some sensational or controversial note. It still is.

The comparative lack of the literary was one of my biggest disappointments. I had imagined that Oxford would be a nest of singing birds. That it would be full of Audens and Isherwoods, Graham Greenes and Aldous Huxleys. Whoever, whatever. But it wasn't. None of those reading English in college showed any creative aspirations. Getting on the college football team, yes. But writing, no. The focus around *Isis* was primarily political, whether the politics of undergraduate societies or national policies. Gowrie was the most literary of the *Isis* editors I encountered.

In my very first week there was something called the freshmen's fair, with stalls recruiting for the various university societies. I looked for the literary. There was a long-faced, intense, mean looking figure hawking a journal he had edited. A literary journal. Called *Tomorrow* or something equally dated. I looked through it. Looked through it again. The hawker, Ian Hamilton, gave his spiel. 'If you care about value. True literature. Beyond the meretricious.' The spiel he was still giving forty years on, by which time he had become a major metropolitan literary power-broker. Clearly profitable. But how was I to know that then? He got impatient as I leafed through it a third time. But it was expensive. I had to take care of my meagre allowance, not squander it all in the first week. The hawker started getting distant without moving away, retreating to his internalised Olympian dream. 'But what's it about ?' I asked. The taboo inquiry of content. The hawker became quite vicious. 'If you can't see that -.' I was shamed into buying it. It was irredeemably boring. Years later the Arts Council was equally shamed into funding the hawker's no less content-free new journal, year after year. I bought only one issue of that, too. Fifteen years later I met him at the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week and he seemed even more sour and censorious.

My first lesson in literary success, had I realised. Stick to aesthetics and avoid social relevance. I was all for form and style and aesthetics. But without the good work of political education, on its own I felt them to be vapid.

In the *Isis* office I met a poet, Yann Lovelock. Ian when I first met him, but soon mutating to Yann. A Breton name, he explained, though why he took a Breton name, not being at all Breton as far as I could make out, I never knew. He was a mystery to me, tall, thin, fey, whimsical, firmly opposed to my leftism, but coming like me from a Midland grammar school. He later become Buddhist chaplain at the Long Larton maximum security prison. When I first me him he was living with his girl friend in some seedy flat in Walton street. I remember him inviting me round to visit them. 'Now for some pot,' he announced. I had no idea what he was talking about. The only pot I knew of was my childhood potty I used to piss in. The very name was off-putting. I don't remember if he offered me any. I certainly didn't try it. That was not to come until the end of the decade. His girlfriend, Ann, was a nurse at the Radcliffe hospital and they got married in his second year and held their wedding reception in my college rooms. I don't know how I got talked into that. Maybe I wanted him to

publish some of my poems in *Isis*, which he did. I published a couple of others in the *Imp*, the college magazine. I was also sending poems to a regional BBC radio programme, Midland Poets, and some had been broadcast. It helped legitimate my claims to a literary career, something about which my parents were sceptical and dubious, as about most of my aspirations. But at some point at Oxford I decided there was no future in poetry. There was not the readership that could financially sustain a career. I resolved I would focus my attention on fiction. And it was a matter of focussing attention. I had plenty to do with my undergraduate courses. I loaded more on top with my *Isis* ambitions. *Isis* was the door to literary London. Or the only one I could see. Poetry, like acting, was something I put behind me. I struggled away at my novel. The lack of literary companionship, of other aspirant novelists, depressed me. Maybe there were some in those lecture crowds, from other colleges. But I never made contact with them.

I had expected Oxford to be different. By the end of second term, when I took my preliminary exams, I was ready to drop out. Fortunately the fashion for dropping out, much touted in the 60s, had not yet begun. Fortunately Yann had not persuaded me to share his pot. I passed prelims with a good result and was told I might expect to get a first in Finals. That relieved my anxieties and cheered me up and I put aside thoughts of leaving and writing a novel. The novel wasn't going very well, but I think I realized there was no reason that it would go any better if I dropped out. How would I live? I concentrated my attention on *Isis*. It might be the way into the BBC or the national press. I knew no other way.

Yann's wedding was in my second year. By then I was setting my sights on editing *Isis*. I think I became assistant editor at the beginning of that second year. Certainly I worked closely with Alastair Macdonald, the new editor, a gentle, friendly unpretentious Londoner. My role as heir apparent was becoming obvious. Yann wooed me to appoint him poetry editor, which I duly made him. I was unused to being wooed and lobbied. It was a brave new world.

Back home in Worcester my English master ran the local Writers' Circle. In that nine months between leaving school and going up to Oxford I had attended it regularly. It was there that I met Michael Alexander who lived locally but had attended a public school, Lancing, I think. He was a committed disciple of Ezra Pound and had visited Rapallo to meet him. The early Pound, indeed, was the model I had followed for much of my own poetry. Alexander had been up at Oxford a year when I arrived, but we met a handful of times. When I came to edit *Isis* I asked him to write a piece on Pound. What I wanted was a leftist discussion of Pound's involvement with fascism. But he sidestepped the political indictment I had commissioned, despite my cajolings. I published the piece anyway. He was at Trinity where he knew the son of the Penguin Classics editor, W. E. Williams, a connection that led, in that characteristic way, to a commission to translate a volume of Anglo-Saxon poetry, Pound's earlier versions of 'The Wanderer' and 'The Seafarer' his stimulus. Later his translation of *Beowulf* replaced David Wright's earlier Penguin. Visiting Australia some thirty years later he told a class of my students how he remembered me as an undergraduate intoning 'Usuria,

usuria' from the *Cantos*. Pound was the mode in those years. Alistair Davie, a friend from school, expelled, and now at the LSE, came down from London with a newly published volume of Pound's critical essays for me. John Sullivan, the Dean of Lincoln and a progressive classicist, wrote enthusiastically of Pound's 'Homage to Sextus Propertius.' Another Poundian was William Cookson, already as an undergraduate at New College editing his Poundian journal *Agenda*. We corresponded but somehow never met. Nor did I meet Peter Dale, a poet whom he regularly published and whom I published in *Isis*. Nor at that stage did I meet Bill Byrom, whose poem I published about Whale Beach in Sydney where he had lived as a child. I think I must have decided that having abandoned writing poetry there was no point in meeting poets any more. But I did meet Stanley Johnson, who had won the Newdigate prize for poetry. He invited me round for tea, for what I reason I never knew. Maybe he was thinking of writing for *Isis*, but he never did. Later he rode a motorbike to Afghanistan, became a spy and a Tory Member of Parliament and fathered Boris, Lord Mayor of London.

Through a contemporary from school, Steve Highcock, I met a couple of poets at University college with him. One was a gentle, fawn like Indian called Adil Jussawalla. The other was a Welshman, Byron Rogers. I passed on their poems, or suggested they send them, to Yann. 'The days of the Georgians are long past,' he ruled, rejecting them. Thirty years later, visiting the Calcutta Writer's Workshop, I found a volume of Adil's early work and learned he had become an admired and respected poet. While Byron became a journalist and speech-writer to the Prince of Wales. Byron had already spent a year at Aberystwyth university college, but had decided an Oxford education better suited his aspirations. His father was a carpenter, something the Queen was to remark on when he had an audience with her years later. 'Like it was the bloody second coming, man,' he told me. He had a signed copy of a book of poems by Kingsley Amis, who had taught at the University of Wales college at Swansea. But it seemed such signed copies were not especially valued. Christopher Ricks related, in a seminar class he taught with Robson, how he had picked up in a second hand bookshop a volume signed 'for my very dear friend, with very best wishes, Kingsley Amis.'

I would go to the Union on debating night, though I never spoke. Indubitably I felt I had the wrong sort of accent. Holding forth in print was one thing, in person another. Print allowed you some anonymity when you walked through the streets. But as much as the debates, it was the Union bar I frequented. Here I drank with the journalists of *Cherwell*, like the editor Bob Chesshyre, later Washington correspondent of the *Observer*, and the drama critic Sheridan Morley, son of the actors Robert Morley and Gladys Cooper and later drama critic of the *Spectator* and biographer of Noel Coward. They were good company. We did not see ourselves in competition with each other's papers.

I don't know whether I met Mike Beloff there or at *Isis*. His ambition, or one of them, was to be president of the Union. With that in mind he lobbied me mercilessly to give him a weekly column when I came to edit *Isis*. The problem was that he was running for president that term. A regular column would – or could – be deemed as lobbying for votes, and that was against the Union's arcane

rules. So it would have to be written pseudonymously. Though the authorship would be an open secret, otherwise why do it. I didn't like the idea of running a pseudonymous column, the point of giving a column to someone was that it was to someone known and in the public, or at least the undergraduate, eye. But in the end I gave in. He was persuasive and unrelenting. The column appeared under the name Diogenes and he had himself photographed obscurely inside a huge concrete water pipe, very industrial and modern, like the shots of elegant models in the neo-realist settings of the new Italian cinema that *Vogue* was running at the time. He couldn't resist adding the suffix O. E. during the week of the Union election. The Old Etonians would get the message. Well, it could have been interpreted as Old Elizabethan, as the old boys of my school styled themselves. But it wasn't. He duly became president and asked me to speak at his farewell debate, which was an honour. But I didn't. For a while we spent a lot of time together. Someone asked him if I had been at school with him. 'Oh God, no!' he exclaimed, shocked. Then he realized the class implications of what he had said and was mortified, or at least he said he was when he told me about it. His father was an historian at Oxford, and later one of the foundation members of the University of Buckingham, Britain's first private university, breaking that tradition of public and quasi-democratic education, a reactionary icon. His aunt Nora Beloff wrote for the *Observer*, the liberal Sunday newspaper. I was never sure what Mike's own politics were. Friendly and enthusiastic, perhaps it was a sense of his Jewishness making him an outsider amidst the ruling class that had made him, like Jenny, able to befriend me. He befriended her, too, and took her to a May ball, the sort of thing I avoided as too posh, traditional, conservative and expensive, requiring formal clothes and dancing skills I did not possess. I was furious with jealousy. Didn't he know any other girls? I tried to compose one last poem, a satire in the vein of Alexander Pope, a poet I never warmed to but whom I was studying at the time. Through Beloff I met another Etonian, Jonathan Aitken, someone of whose legendary sexual conquests Mike was breathlessly in awe. Aitken, grandson of the newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook and son of a Tory MP, was always genial and friendly, something which always amazed and relieved me, since I knew so few of these top people, who had all gone to school together and were destined to rule the country. There was always something rather rakish about him. I can't say I was surprised when he became a Tory minister, nor when he ended up in gaol. I got invited to a posh party either through him or Sir George Young, and I remember spending an evening talking to Emma Cavendish, about class consciousness, and arranging to meet her the next day, in the library as I recall, but I didn't turn up, too hung over, too uncertain of what I might have said, all in all too terrified and defeated, the price tag of my new shoes still stuck beneath the arch, as one of my grammar school friends pointed out when I collapsed drunkenly on his floor after getting back to college.

'So what's your line?' Pete Theobald asked.

'My line?'

'What's your editorial policy going to be?'

'Policy?'

'You don't have a clue, do you?'

'I just want to make it a good magazine. Good writing, good features.'

'You don't have a clue. You need an agenda. A theme to hold it together.'

'It's not propaganda,' I said, probably. The sort of thing we had been taught to say, to distinguish the indistinguishable.

'How about culture and society?' Pete offered.

'Culture and society,' I pondered.

I had read Raymond Williams' book when it came out in Pelican. I had read Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* too. These were hailed as the new committed, socialist, egalitarian working class standard bearers, the proclamations of a new society that would have a place for worker intellectuals, that would break down the exclusions of the old patrician culture of privilege. I did my best with both books, but when it came to plundering ideas for essays I never got much out of them. They were fine on airy rhetoric. But I had the problem I had found with Hamilton's magazine. When it came to it I couldn't find that they were saying very much. It was many decades before I realized that that was the recipe for success.

Still, culture and society sounded like a good formula. Pete had shaken me. I had been focussed on gaining the editorship but it was true, I had not worked out any policy or programme. I was relying on publishing people I knew, people I knew to be good, or who were already on the staff. But now Pete had spoken I saw the need of at least an ostensible policy. And I could see how to apply it. In each issue I would run a major article on social or political issues, and another one on cultural matters. It would be like the man who taught himself Chinese metaphysics by reading the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entries on China and metaphysics. So, culture and society.

Pete Theobald was somebody who took me in hand, another of those who began to lobby me when it was evident I was likely to be the next editor of *Isis*. Yet for Pete it never seemed a personal issue involved with his own advancement. He was at Lincoln, a year ahead of me. He lived in a flat in Walton Street, the *avant garde* radical quarter, shared with people who were involved with the New Left and the new wave cinema criticism. He was one of those college people who like me had chosen the university as his forum rather than college. How he tracked me down I don't know. He rarely dined in college. One evening he stayed late instructing me in film or politics and decided to stay on the couch. This sort of thing was dubious, the scout looked at me fishily, presumably expecting a bribe. There was a lot I didn't know about Pete. He was a Londoner, possibly state school, it was hard to tell, he seemed to have decided to soar above mere class and convention, to be even superior to the New Left people, which given their evident superiority was something rarely achieved. His hair was cut short in a chic continental way, already flecked with grey. Film was his speciality. I remember his being hugely applauded for a three hundred and sixty degree hand held camera shot he filmed for

some experimental movie. Hand held cameras were a revolutionary part of the aesthetic of the new at that time

'Film,' he said, 'film,' dismissing some pronouncement of the *Sunday Times* film critic. The critic had gone on about alienation, a modish term used to categorise Antonioni. 'He doesn't know it's a term from Marx.' Nor did I until that point, but it was a lesson I remembered. 'Film is just about film, you know that,' said Pete. Another lesson I remembered. It was Pete who encouraged me not to stay on at Oxford and do graduate work, which I was considering. 'Anyone any good gets out. You make it somewhere else. In the real world. Then you come back on your own terms. Assuming you want to.' He was the first person to stress Oxford's provinciality to me, the closed world not only of the colleges but the university. It was a world I had looked at from outside and below. He soared effortlessly above it, as effortlessly as he steered his bicycle through the streets, smiling his detached smile. He already seemed to belong to a metropolitan, cosmopolitan even, world of media and fashion and art and was faintly surprised when he ended up with a third class degree. I don't think it disturbed him. He cycled airily around the city, knowing an amazing range of people in cinema, theatre, writing and politics.

I was duly nominated editor and began assembling my team. Editing a weekly magazine was in effect a full time job. The office, a small space above the Hollywell Press in Alfred Street, was continually full of people, writers, aspirant writers, lobbyists. It was impossible to get any writing done in it. In desperation I disappeared into the city public library to write my first editorial, away from the impossible distractions. 'Don't you ever do that again,' the printers said, as the usual crises erupted and I was nowhere to be found.

I had worked out a rough plan for each issue – social issues article, cultural article, short story. One issue about which the left felt strongly was the monarchy. It was not, I decided, important enough for a whole article, so I wrote an editorial about its inevitable demise. 'Some day my prince will go' was the headline; it turned up in proof as 'some day my prince will come,' of course, but we spotted it in time. *Paris Match* phoned me for an interview. Various angry letters were received. 'Why don't you Oxford snobs go home,' thundered one undergraduate, Lord Sudeley. At least that seemed to be his name, as far as I could decipher the signature. We printed the letter. I felt somewhat hurt, once again reminded that I didn't belong, and puzzled about the use of 'snobs' in what, I discovered, was its earlier, nineteenth century meaning.

Lady Chatterly's Lover had just been published in Penguin, after a landmark law case ruling that it was not obscene. John Sparrow, the Warden of All Souls, wrote an article for *Encounter* arguing that some of the episodes involved buggery. I forget who it was who came in with the piece and suggested we ran some extracts from it in our column of humorous asides. Buggery was deemed to be humorous, and none of us could believe that Lawrence was really referring to it. Though without doubt he was. A letter duly arrived from the Warden requesting me to call on him, and bring along

whoever was responsible for putting him in our comic column. I had some moments of serious anxiety, and then I decided it really was no business of his what I put in *Isis*. It was not a summons from the proctors, the disciplinary body. As far as I was concerned the head of a college that had no undergraduates, or post-graduates for that matter, had no authority over me. I mentioned this to Pete.

'Oh, go along,' he said.

I wasn't keen to enter such a lion's den alone. As for who was responsible for the excerpts, it was me who put the column together.

'I'll come,' Pete said.

We duly went. Sparrow seemed a bit put out that my reply to him hadn't mentioned I was bringing someone.

'I was absolutely furious at first,' he began, *allegro non troppo*, and then he slowed down and beamed at me, adding in somewhat honeyed tones 'but I don't mind at all now.'

Well, that was a relief.

'Do you play football?' he asked me.

'No.'

'Really. You look like a footballer. I love football.'

Pete indicated that he sometimes played ball games.

There was a bit more idle chatter and then Sparrow produced a copy of Matthew Arnold and read the passage about 'Wragg is dead,' one of those cultural landmarks of English literature in which – it seemed to my tender sensibilities – the absurd surnames of the working class are held up for anthropological examination, if not contempt. A bit rich coming from someone called Sparrow, I thought.

Then the manservant appeared and intoned sepulchrally, 'Your bath is ready, sir.'

'If you'd been on your own he might have invited you to share it,' said Pete.

Then I was summoned before the college disciplinary body, the Bursar this time I think. The Australian physicist who had the room below mine had complained about the noise I made at night.

'What are you hammering?' I was asked.

'Hammering?'

Finally we worked it out it was my typewriter, as in the peace and isolation of the night I was writing the next week's editorial, always at the last minute. Then I would climb out through the bathroom window, carefully, and across the graveyard and over the spikes onto the High. The spikes were a bit tricky, and one evening a policeman on the beat gave me a helpful hand over. Then I would go down Alfred Street to slip the finished piece through the printer's letterbox, ready for them to set it first thing, hours before I awoke. The bursar and I came to an agreement I would not type after eleven p.m. George Irvine, one of the American New Left theoreticians in college was outraged and suggested we should assemble a team of typewriters and pound all night. But I had enough self-

protective sense not to provoke trouble or follow provocateurs.

Even if the typing had to be finished by eleven, I still worked late most nights and generally missed breakfast in college. But the *Isis* editors traditionally breakfasted at a café in the High called the Town & Gown. *Isis* was on sale there, and some editors were reputed to pay for their breakfasts by raiding the tin can on the counter in which people paid for their copy. The place was run by a friendly young Cypriot, another Mike. Every morning I had fried egg, sausage and tomato. Often I would lunch there, my first taste of moussaka. The Town and Gown was where the editor held court, planned articles, picked up gossip, before going down to the office. I was happy at last. Even though I was being charged for the college breakfasts I never ate.

I no longer have my bound volume of *Isis* on hand to remind me of what we published. A piece on Jamaica from a post-graduate geographer who had been at school with me, Colin Clarke, later a fellow of Jesus, one of the first articles anywhere to discuss the Rastafarians. A piece on French new cinema by a critic Pete knew, with a front cover illustration of Anouk Aimée in cabaret gear. We had to put her sideways to fit into the template of Laurence Reed's cover design. It was the time of yet another campaign to admit women to the Oxford Union. Beneath the photograph we declared, ‘She may be lying down, but women can stand on their own two feet. Vote to admit women to the Union now.’ But it was to be years before they were finally admitted. Amongst the fiction I made a point of running each week there was a short story by Michael Stewart, one of those future novelists I had hoped to meet, but I never did: it was reported back to me that his father was pleased that his son could get into print. His father was J. I. M. Stewart, the English don at Christ Church, who wrote thrillers under the name of Michael Innes. I never met him, either. I ran another story by Karen McLeod, who later became editor, and a good friend, and published a story of mine in turn. I ran some pieces by Miles Kingston, who became a humorous columnist for *The Times*. Never met him, either. A freshman called Terry Jones, a friendly, unassuming Londoner, joined the news staff: he seemed torn in his allegiances between writing and performance, and later became part of the Monty Python team. On the socially aware front, I sent Geoff Varley to cover a bingo game in the suburbs, expecting a denunciation of the mindless exploitation of the working class. He came back saying he rather enjoyed it, and might go again. Bloody Geoff, couldn't rely on him. And I organised a short story competition and got as judges Iris Murdoch and Francis Hope, the latter a fellow of All Souls and literary editor of the *New Statesman*, later killed in a DC-10 crash over Paris. The essence of Oxford was of course networking, making your invaluable future contacts, and I still didn't feel socially at ease with that. I never got to meet either of the judges; everything could be done by correspondence, and I felt that to try and see them would look pushy and intrusive. And editing the magazine was so time-consuming, I was so busy. 'You were seen going through the quad with all the cares of the world on your shoulders,' Gareth Stedman-Jones, a New Left freshman in college remarked to me, in that faintly mocking superior way of the New Left. The college magazine asked

me to contribute an article. I was far too stretched for time to write anything and dashed off a letter suggesting they interviewed college figures who were making a name for themselves in the university at large. They printed the letter. I was mortified with embarrassment. 'Serves you bloody well right, you arrogant twerp,' said one of my grammar school friends. But Pete thought it was great, nothing to be ashamed of. 'Puts them in their place,' he said.

Towards the end of the term there was a big scandal. A couple of undergraduates had been found in bed together: the girl had been sent down, as being kicked out for ever was politely called; the boy was rusticated for the rest of the term. That was how things were in those days. The metropolitan media swarmed down to report on the scandal and a seedy looking individual came to talk about it with me for television news one lunch time. I said the editor was not around and I couldn't help him. That was how one behaved in those days, refusing to co-operate with scandal mongering media. ITV News was not going to help the girl's plight, not in 1962. That was how I refused to speak to David Frost, the man who interviewed eight British prime ministers and six or seven US presidents, let alone Muhammad Ali, Nelson Mandela and Yasser Arafat. He had been a celebrity at Cambridge, editing *Granta* and appearing in cabaret; now, I was told, he was making it as a television reporter and appearing in a night club five nights a week. No wonder he looked pale and seedy. What a squalid end to a promising undergraduate career, I reflected. I wished I had realized who he was, since when he was editing *Granta* I had won second prize in a short story competition he ran. First prize was won by Shena McKay, who was up at Lady Margaret Hall, another of those novelists of the future I never met.

In due course I nominated Jack Waterhouse as my successor, and he appointed Geoff to follow him. Jack generously made me theatre critic. 'You shouldn't be doing it,' Pete said, 'you know that.' I did know it, I was not versed in the world of theatre. But it gave me free tickets, so I could take Jenny along when she could take time off, now in her last term, finals looming over her. By the end of the term I had seen so many bad productions I was effectively put off theatre for life.

It was a convention that the out-going editor should give a party for contributors. I decided to practice my egalitarianism and invited the printers. A couple turned up, but no one really talked to them.

Summer vacation I went to Greece with Jenny and a friend of hers from college, Deborah Thomson, and Deborah's boy friend, Ronnie Bon de Souza Perlez. Deborah told me her father had gone to university with Samuel Beckett, and Beckett was godfather to her brother, a surprising piece of information. I had never considered Beckett to be the sort of person who would be a godfather. We stayed at Ronnie's family's palatial house in Geneva on the way, drove down through Italy, and I caught typhus in Greece and had to come back by boat to Athens and then fly home. And then it was my final year and work, four terms to catch up on for the time I had spent on *Isis*, plus the new work still to be done. I had lodgings which I found seedy and depressing. It was the coldest winter since

1947, the water pipes in the house all froze, I had to re-use the same water from my hot water bottle each night, and go into college to wash. The Oxford buses were all out of action with cracked radiators, and the pavements were slippery and treacherous with ice. The Bodleian was one of the few warm places. Jenny was in London and though she came down a few times, the relationship began to fall apart. I had little time for anything now but study.

One of the Lincoln undergraduates reading English latched onto me, Andrew Farmer. Perhaps Robson had put us in the same tutorial for some of that year. He wore his coat over his shoulders like a cloak and a flower in the buttonhole; by pacing himself against me he ensured that I kept to a strict regimen, fussing like a mother hen. It was a strange relationship but I accepted it. It was undoubtedly useful. We would meet in the Bodleian in the morning, after my breakfast in the Town and Gown, go out for morning tea in a café or in college, return to the library after thirty minutes and stay till lunch, walk to college together to eat, and at two o'clock he would be herding me back into the library where we stayed till afternoon tea in the covered market, then took a break, then worked till Hall at seven. In the first term I would go out for a drink some evenings. My lodgings were too depressing to work in. But in second or third term Andrew would be shooing me back into the library after Hall for a final couple of hours work. We were not the only ones following this desperate regimen. There was another pale-faced ascetic looking undergraduate regularly there, Alex Cockburn. 'His mother's Sally Bowles, think of that, man,' Byron told me; the girl from Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*, one of my favourite novels. Could it possibly be true?

The Bodleian is the pleasantest library I ever worked in. Membership was conferred at a ceremony requiring you to take an oath that you would not kindle fire in the library buildings. For the first two terms as an undergraduate you were restricted to the Radcliffe Camera, a circular building with galleries rising into the rotunda, climactic scene of more than one genteel detective novel. But after a couple of terms you were allowed into Bodley proper. The Upper Reading Room was huge, airy, spacious. Paintings of the great writers of the past hung on the walls. World famous scholars sat penning their world famous books at the rows of desks. Some slumbered quietly, but Bodley's librarian had declared that sleeping readers did less damage to the books than those awake, so they were left undisturbed. Absolute silence reigned; except for the clip clop of high heels up and down the aisles, introducing a plangent erotic frisson. You could sit there dreaming of assignations, as long as you did not speak. Regulars might nod at each other, but it was all very English and remote. Except for one memorable day.

I had been immersed in medieval alliterative romances and unaware that the Cuban missile crisis had brought the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation. The confrontation had been going on for a week before I realized. I was studying desperately. We were all in the library that day, international scholars, desperate undergraduates, erotic daydreamers, our heads bowed over our books, when a huge and menacing roar spread through the sky. Near to Oxford was the United States Air Force base of Brize Norton. What we heard was a flight of B-52 strategic bombers flying off towards the Soviet

Union. Those were the days of the four minute warning. Four minutes before meltdown.

Everyone looked up. People who all year had shuffled past each other silently, now exchanged glances across the desks and smiled wanly. For four minutes we all sat there looking at each other. No one worked at their books. It was a unique moment of community, possibly our last. And then the four minutes had passed and we had not been incinerated like the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and we smiled at each other in relief, and bowed down to our books again.

I applied to the *Guardian* for a job, but I couldn't face going up to Manchester, from where it was still published at that time, for an interview. I realised if I couldn't face going there for an interview I would certainly not want to work there permanently, so I withdrew my application. I applied for a traineeship at the BBC and didn't get it. I was disappointed but turned the experience into a short story and Alan Ross published it in *London Magazine*. The writer's solution, turn your disappointments into fiction. But there was another disappointment I didn't write about. I had been sending poems to a BBC radio programme, 'Midland Poets' and some had been broadcast. I contacted the producer, Paul Humphries, and arranged to see him in Birmingham. I asked him about making a career in broadcasting. He took me to a depressing canteen in the BBC centre and said 'Don't.' I was taken aback. 'Don't do it,' he said. 'It will destroy you. If you want to be a writer, this will kill you. Be a writer,' he said, 'don't get into broadcasting. This place is terrible.' I realize now that it was wise and sincere and caring advice, but at the time I was shattered.

I went to the university appointments board and the man there was encouraging about my prospects.

'Well, well, you edited *Isis*, you're tipped for a first, you've done very well for an ironmoulder's son.'

He meant it positively, which only made it worse.

I applied for a college exchange scholarship to Cornell where I proposed to do an M. A. in creative writing.

'So what you are suggesting, Mr Wilding, is that we send you to America so you can write a novel.'

'Well, yes,' I agreed.

They smiled at me sceptically. Afterwards I was told that while I was the best candidate, they thought it would be better for me to stay and do post-graduate work at Oxford, and gave the scholarship to an engineer. I spoke to Robson about doing a B. Litt. Robson phoned up Helen Gardner who ran graduate courses and was something of a termagant.

'Well, we've got her on side, strike while the iron is hot,' he said, sending me off to be interviewed by her, and she accepted my proposal to work on Samuel Butler, the seventeenth-century poet from my home county. Provincial loyalties. I had discovered some unpublished biographical details about him in the County Record Office back home during the vacations. In the end I never began the B.Litt.

Robson told me about the chance of a lectureship in Australia. £1,100 a year was considerably better than the £400 a state studentship would provide: research would mean still having to spend vacations with my parents. There was no chance of their supplementing it. My father had already refused to make up £50 deducted from my grant one year when his income was means-tested. By this stage I was fed up with my father and the class system and the provinces and the weather and the lack of money. I applied for the Australian job. If I got a good enough degree I would go into exile in the manner of those English novelists I admired, Lawrence, Isherwood, Durrell.

Finals were gruelling, nine three hour examinations, two a day, with a weekend in the middle giving a day and a half off. I had a couple of drinks with a girl one evening in the Kings' Arms and was so hung over and sick the next morning I thought I'd ruined everything. We were examined on all of English literature, but in preparing for finals necessarily you focussed on three or four authors and hoped suitable questions would come up. Sometimes they didn't. But I was able to draw on memories of an article I'd written for *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 'Bishop Wulfstan Not as Bad as Made Out To Be' to get me through the Old English paper, and on memories of work done at school on Addison and Keats to avoid other catastrophes. Some weeks after finals were the vivas, in which you were questioned orally. The timetable of interviews was posted outside the examination schools. I expected I might get on the borderline of a first and second and with a twenty minute interview perhaps talk myself upwards. But I had been given a five minute interview. I was desolate. My language tutor came past.

'Well done,' he said.

I expressed gloom.

'A little bird tells me a first,' he said.

I went in to be grilled. I was asked a couple of token questions and congratulated. A congratulatory first. The only paper I didn't get alphas on was the criticism one. I had expounded the views of Georg Lukács, from a review copy of *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* appropriated from the *Isis* office, on the necessity of literature espousing socialist values. Andrew got his first too, after a gruelling hour long viva.

I realize I have made almost no mention of my tutors, Douglas Grey, Dennis Burden and Wallace Robson, who taught me so much. Let alone the lecturers. It is inexcusable, but it was one of the things you learned at Oxford. Effortless superiority. An Oxford man never talks about work.

I had a dream not so long ago. I was in Oxford and rather lost. Not lost geographically so much as unsure of myself, where to go, what to do. I think it was the beginning of the academic year and some indeterminate time towards evening, that chiaroscuro of late afternoon light, approaching time for Hall. At some point soon I would have to find dinner. I was wandering around, the colleges blank and unwelcoming in the grey light. It was not quite drizzling, and yet the atmosphere had that grainy, cold

damp feel. Woodriffe was at a bus stop and we began talking. He, too, seemed just to have arrived. He seemed friendly enough. The very fact of his talking was friendliness in itself. He did not stand out from the gloom. His features were unremarkable, his accent unobtrusive, unspecific. But he did say that there were a lot of state school undergraduates at Oxford now. I was from a state school, I said. He seemed not to hold it against me, for which I was grateful. The very fact of his remark suggested that he was not from a state school but was one of the privileged and had come to Oxford by natural progression. But he was not unfriendly. And he solved the problem of dinner by suggesting I came into Hall with him as his guest. You were able to sign guests in for Hall on some nights. And so we walked through the shaded medieval streets, along the grimed grey pitted college walls and through a porter's lodge, unchallenged by the dark suited porters, and into the lighted Hall. A stream of us filed in, gowned and suited or blazered I suppose, though no details stood out, young men of the same age and size and cut, taking their places at the long tables, sitting at the benches and swinging their feet round and over to sit in parallel rows.

And then we got separated. He went to the left of a table, I got carried in the stream to the right. I followed along, expecting to catch up with him when the two streams merged, but they continued separately, one each side of the rows of tables. I looked for him to see if he had found a place and sat down, or if he was still walking along to find one, but I could not see him. I was a little anxious, perhaps, but not panicking. And then I got filtered into some other stream and was walking behind high table where the dons sat. I tried to increase my pace to get past and round again into the undergraduate area, worried that some white jacketed college servant would order me away, or some don complain, but no one came up, no one complained, though some did look up interrogatively, and then I was past and back in the stream again. But I had lost all sight of Woodriffe. I walked on amongst the remaining undergraduates who were finding a space on a bench and sitting down at a table, walked on until I had done a complete circuit of the Hall. The direction had been anti-clockwise, for what it is worth. A detail. The only thing to do was to go round again. The streams of undergraduates remained reasonably constant, latecomers entering from outside. There was a girl amongst them, not at all attractive but not unfriendly, somewhat frizzy hair and spectacles, again not an upper class accent, nor identifiably regional. She smiled as she looked around. 'I've lost the person who brought me,' I said. 'So have I,' she said, and laughed. I felt relieved someone else was in the same predicament. We walked on. She got separated into the stream the other side of the table and must have found her host and place because that was the last I saw of her.

I completed another partial circuit. At one corner of the Hall there was an arched doorway out into a stone corridor. 'I was invited in but I've lost the person who invited me,' I said to another young man standing there, suited, anonymous, no distinguishing features but not unfriendly. 'What was his name?' he asked. 'Woodriffe,' I told him. He shook his head. 'Don't know him,' he said, 'are you sure he's here?' 'As far as I know,' I said. We looked round. Maybe we did another circuit. There was no sign of Woodriffe at any of the tables.

'Where did you meet him?'

'At a bus stop, actually,' I said.

'Did he have luggage?'

'No,' I said.

Nor did I, for that matter.

'Well, there you are,' he said.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'He couldn't have been coming up without his luggage.'

'Oh,' I said.

'Are you sure you didn't invent him?'

'Invent him?'

'To compensate for your insecurity at coming in alone.'

'Do you think so?' I asked.

'It's possible,' he said.

I thought about it.

'I think I might have,' I said.

We stepped out into the stone corridor.

'That sort of thing can happen,' he said. 'Social anxiety, fear of not belonging. It can lead you to manufacture a friend to cover your fear of isolation.'

Had I been so anxious about Oxford? I had, I knew it.

I stepped out into the grey, cold air of the grey, cold street. I turned to speak to him. To tell him that indeed I had, that my fearfulness had led me in desperation to create an imaginary friend. But he had gone.

Australia

Ten Good Years

I found it hard to fit back into Britain after three years away. Well, I'd always found it hard to fit in, clearly. But equally clearly Australia was more fun. I hadn't found a literary community in England. David Lodge and Martin Green were both in the department at Birmingham, but for much of the time David was on leave in America, and Martin soon returned there permanently. I wrote to Alan Ross, who had published a couple of my stories in *London Magazine*, and asked if he could give me any reviewing. Generously he did, and again as with *The Bulletin*, it was an exciting range of material I reviewed for a couple of years: Christina Stead, Albert Jarry, Susan Sontag, Anna Kavan, Barbara Skelton, Peter Weiss, Heinrich Böll, L. P. Hartley. It gave me a tenuous sense of connection to the literary life, books coming through the mail, the enjoyment of getting the new issue of the magazine with the review in print. But it was still at a remove – the books came by mail and I mailed the reviews back in. All very alienated. No long literary lunches. No face to face meetings. I knew the writers and the other reviewers only through the literary pages. I think I only ever entered the office a couple of times.

'I'm Michael Wilding,' I introduced myself.

'Yes, of course you are,' Hugo Williams reassured me.

London was another world from Birmingham.

Peter Edwards on leave in England had reported back to Sydney that I was open to offers. The offer was a senior lectureship and I took it. Despite three years as a lecturer at Sydney, Birmingham had to my annoyance only offered me an assistant lectureship. After a year they gave me a lectureship and tenure; it gave me great pleasure promptly to put in my resignation. John Sullivan, who had left Oxford for the University of Texas, offered me a job in Austin, but it was only for a year. Whereas Sydney offered tenure for life. That would suit me fine, while I wrote my books. Then the world.

It took a while for the appointment to be confirmed. Not everyone was eager for my return. David Armstrong, the reactionary professor of philosophy, opposed to my opposition either to Goldberg or to the war in Vietnam, or both, allegedly tried to block it, and created delays.

And then Claire Tomalin wrote from the *New Statesman* saying that she had enjoyed reading my *London Magazine* reviews and would I be interested in regular novel reviewing for them. Would I? It was the breakthrough I had been hoping for. The way to literary success in London then, and probably still, was through reviewing for one of the literary weeklies or quality broadsheets. Regular reviewing for the *New Statesman* was the peak position.

But it was not to be. I had already resigned my lectureship in Birmingham and was returning to Sydney. There was discussion about air-mailing me the books from England. But that seemed impossibly expensive and complicated to do in the England of those days. Postage. Distance. So it

never happened. I considered trying to revoke my resignation. But was reviewing for the *New Statesman* worth the wretched prospect of staying in England? I didn't think so. I didn't want to stay in Birmingham. And even if I got a position in London, the prospect of the sort of accommodation I would be able to afford there on an academic salary, even with the London loading, was unappealing. Anyway, no one was offering a job in London. So the offer came to nothing. I regretted the lost opportunity. Should I have withdrawn my resignation and stayed on at Birmingham? Just to do book reviews? It was the way into the literary world. But it was also a trap. One of the enemies of promise for the English writer, as Cyril Connolly had written and as his life demonstrated, was being distracted into regular reviewing. It made your reputation, provided a much better income than writing fiction or poetry, and kept your name in print week after week. But it became a treadmill from which it was hard to get the time or energy to write any book yourself. Reading all those novels, year after year, undermined your sense of your own literary identity, destroyed your confidence for writing your own work. And publishing collections of reprinted book reviews was hardly the same as writing a book. Sometimes I thought I had missed a big breakthrough, sometimes I thought I had been saved. I remembered Wallace Robson saying to me, 'The trouble with reviewing is it gives one a factitious sense of achievement.'

I came back via North America. In Montreal I stayed with a couple of friends from the Sydney Push, Cam Perry and Brenda Linn. At Sir George Williams University the students were staging an occupation, throwing computers out of the windows. In New York I stayed with Jonah Raskin and his wife Eleanor. He'd been working on Conrad and contacted me about an article I'd written on *Nostromo* in *Essays in Criticism*. They had come to stay with me in England, but when Eleanor heard on the radio about the demonstrations at the Chicago Democratic convention she insisted they flew back immediately. Later she joined the Weather Underground. For a while Jonah was in Algeria with Eldridge Cleaver as Minister of Information for the Yippies. He asked me to fly out and join them. But it didn't seem like a good idea even at the time.

When I stayed with them on Riverside Drive there was an early morning knock on the door and muffled conversation. Then Eleanor opened the door to the room where I was sleeping.

'Don't freak, Michael,' she said, 'the pigs have taken Jonah away.'

Columbia University had filed a private writ of attempted petty larceny against him. At a disciplinary tribunal after a sit-in he had tried to disrupt the proceedings by seizing the chairman's gavel. Down at the Tombs later in the morning Eleanor borrowed a lawyer from the Black Panther trial going on that day and got Jonah out on bail.

Staying with them I smoked my first joint of marijuana. Loved it. Down in Texas visiting John Sullivan I smoked some more. And a lot more in Mexico City, staying with another Push friend, Arthur King and his East German partner Brigitte, who later married Paddy McGuinness. Arthur, having cracked his skull falling on a concrete floor, had given up smoking and handed me the remains of his stash, which I consumed. We climbed the pyramids. Which was all very well. But descending

was my introduction to dope paranoia. It was like being one of those sacrificial victims not meant to climb back down. I sat on each step, too overwhelmed by fear and vertigo to stand, and inched down that way. At the airport I thought I was pissing blood. But it was the pink reflection from the red walls of the urinal. Or my bloodshot eyes. I think.

Sit-ins, occupations, student uprisings were the note of the times. Birmingham had had its event in 1968 when the students occupied the Great Hall. I went along to have a look, invited by some of the activists, curiosity mixed with an expression of solidarity. The academic staff in general were disapproving. The old left, like Richard Hoggart, especially so. They felt outmanoeuvred. To the activists, the old left's inactivity was a mark of complacency and co-option. To the old left the students represented adventurism and anarchism. My feelings were, as so often, mixed. I responded to the romantic illusion of action, of participation, or shaking the foundations of the establishment. I had been influenced more strongly than I realized by the Sydney Libertarians. But the anarchic randomness of the student uprisings in the end served mainly to weaken the old left and to strengthen the forces of reaction. But that was in the end. In the present it was quite exciting and fun.

Back in Sydney the protests were more motivated than in Britain. Like the United States, Australia was involved in the war in Vietnam. And like the States, students were being drafted to fight. Opposition to the war and conscription provided a meaningful focus for dissent, and the protests had a clear and valid purpose. I was soon caught up in them.

For some reason that I cannot remember I was wearing a suit on May Day 1969. I went into university in the late morning to find a massive protest assembling on the front lawn. The University Regiment was scheduled to have a march on the university grounds. The anti-war movement on campus organized a demonstration in protest. The idea was to sit down in from of the regiment. I joined in. Students looked at me with some suspicion in my interviews and funerals suit. I was a bit apprehensive about ruining it with grass stains. But it was all in a good cause. And when the engineering students and rugger buggers began manhandling us, trying forcibly to drag us away from the demonstration, my solidarity was demonstrated. On camera.

Leslie Rogers, the head of department, told me some days later that he had been over in the vice-chancellor's office looking at photographs of me. No doubt in my suit I was quite distinctive.

'Oh, yes,' I said.

'Yes,' he said.

'That's nice,' I said. 'Keeping in the limelight.'

'Well, keep out of it in future,' he said.

It was meant menacingly, but I was into passive resistance and geniality. Make love not war, as we used to put it.

That was as far as any retribution went. Officially. I assumed I was now marked in the eyes of the vice-chancellor and administration. When a commission of inquiry into the events was set up, I went

on the attack. Strike first.

The inquiry was called because someone had thrown a tomato at the Governor of New South Wales who was there to inspect the troops. Sir Roden Cutler was a war hero, a VC with an artificial leg. That was not something that impressed the protestors especially, and one of them had hurled a tomato that found its mark. The inquiry was designed to find out who.

The Libertarians now got into the act, debating and pontificating about activism versus inactivism, having for years espoused the latter. They had a publication, *The Broadsheet*, printed on foolscap paper from typewritten stencils. The machine gun of the revolution those Gestetner duplicators were fondly called. It wasn't my idea of the ideal medium for literary expression. Not in the *New Statesman* or *London Magazine* class. But it had extraordinary prestige, or claimed it had, which was close to the same thing. To be amongst the *crème de la crème* of the Sydney intelligentsia in those days, writing for the *Broadsheet* was mandatory. And difficult of access.

So I wrote a piece called 'The Hand that Threw the Tomato.' I suggested that the commission of inquiry looking into the students involved in the incident should also look into the actions of the vice-chancellor and administration. To arrange a military march on campus in 1969 at the height of an unpopular war for which students were eligible for conscription, and to hold it on May Day, the day of solidarity for the international left, was an irresponsible act of provocation.

The article was brief and anonymous. The deputy vice-chancellor, Bill O'Neill, greeted me at the staff club bar shortly after it appeared.

'Next time you denounce the vice-chancellor and administration in print,' he said, 'just leave out the "and administration", would you.'

It was one of my earliest lessons in the realities of politics, an introduction to the existence of fractures in the ruling class. And a warning about any illusions of preserving anonymity.

The vice-chancellor, Bruce Williams, joined me at lunch not long afterwards. I was sitting at a table alone, and he asked if he might join me. Of course.

'And how long are you thinking of staying in Australia this time?' he asked.

I was a bit taken aback. He was a new vice-chancellor but he had clearly checked up on me and knew I'd been here for three years earlier.

'I wasn't planning to leave,' I assured him.

I forget what he said. Nothing reassuring.

Those were the days when vice-chancellors actually came into the staff club and talked to staff. Even when they were unpopular. The university was, even if not that small, still cohesive enough for people to know each other. Issues could still be dealt with informally, even, on the surface, genially. Nowadays the vice-chancellor has his own chef and is catered for in his own suite of rooms. And the staff club has been closed down. No longer is there a place where subject specialisms can be transcended, as they were in the ferment of the 60s and 70s. The Bill O'Neill foot-rail, a splendid brass construct running round the base of the bar, on which we could press our feet in memory of the

deputy vice-chancellor, has vanished who knows where. So have the ornate beer handles and plaque honouring 'two old beer-cocks', Leslie Rogers, professor Early English Language and Literature, and Dick Champion, like O'Neill a professor of Psychology. They were not especially thrilled to be remembered solely for their drinking, but they accepted it. They had done a lot of drinking there, after all.

'I've only ever been booked for drink driving a couple of times,' Dick Champion assured me. 'And oddly enough each time I'd been meeting my son.'

'And yet you still don't believe in Freud,' I said in quiet amazement. He was a behaviourist, a rat-runner, a statistics man, like most of the psychologists by then.

When I first arrived in Australia in 1963 I brought with me a generalized left wing politics, a working class resentment of exclusion from privilege along with an awareness of my own privilege in having won a scholarship to Oxford. When I edited *Isis* I gave it a strong focus on leftish social issues. But I had little affiliation with the structured political parties. The Labour Club was too public school for me, all professional politicians in the making, or maybe already made. The new left was so theoretical I didn't know what it was about, though I tried to find out and I religiously bought *New University*, its Oxford offshoot, and *New Left Review*. I even subscribed to the latter, when I first came to Sydney, along with the *New Statesman.* But I had attended no political meetings. Mainly I mixed with university journalists and, insofar as I could find them, writers.

I forget who introduced me to the Sydney Libertarians. There was a direct line from Sydney University to the Push. Many of the Push were from the Philosophy and Psychology departments, staff, graduate students and undergraduates. The Push drank in the Newcastle Hotel at five, and around eight moved on to the Royal George; later, when the Royal George fell out of favour, they moved on to the Criterion.

I was soon taken down to the Newcastle. And there it was, Sydney's old bohemia, still assembled there at the bottom of George Street where *The Bulletin* magazine and Angus & Robertson publishers used to have their offices, a direct continuity with Henry Lawson and Norman Lindsay and the 1890s. It was the bohemian that appealed to me. And the girls. Uninhibited, forthright, accessible, inviting girls. I never really got to know the leaders of the Push well. There were indeed leaders in this anarchist group, and they were all men. I much preferred the girls, as we still called them in those days.

They could all seem rather daunting, men and women. I was there one time with a girl who had never encountered them before and her anxiety was palpable. 'Nothing to worry about,' Craig McGregor assured her, 'they're a friendly lot of people.' I wasn't that sure that they were. But Craig was eternally friendly and cheerful, unique amongst the writers I have known. Years later I met him at a bush dance at Repentance Creek, unrepentantly cheerful as ever. An early Dylanologist, Craig has told how he picked up the sacred guitar and strummed a few chords when Dylan briefly went out

of the room in the course of an interview.

I remember saying to Lynne Segal, long before she moved to London and wrote her books of radical feminism, or maybe she said it to me, 'We fought your lot in Spain.' The left versus the anarchists. I retained a wariness of anarchism. I was not convinced by the Libertarians' identification of fascism and communism as identical authoritarian systems. But I took on a general anti-authoritarian stance and I found the Libertarian opposition to existing authority appealing. Especially since existing authority was the old right wing Liberal Country party coalition with its generally reactionary politics and its notorious prohibition of a range of books. It wasn't hard to be oppositional to the way things were. Inevitably I absorbed a lot of the Libertarian world view. It was appealing when you were young and were trying to break free of family, school days, even university. I could see Paddy Dawson's point when he called the family the original authoritarian institution.

But the Push had no interest in plans for social amelioration, none of that English socialism that had emerged from an attempt to improve the lot of the oppressed, working class and colonized. Most of the libertarians, like most bohemians, came from middle class backgrounds. Although there were some exceptions, their brand of anarchism was predominantly of the right-wing individualist variety, a politics more of the American libertarian right than of progressive anarchism. Its gurus like Paddy McGuinness moved readily to embrace free-market capitalism and were programmatically anti-left. The Push did not extol the worker hero, or lament the worker victim. Indeed, those who worked were thought to be mugs. Academics were allowed into the Libertarian world because demonstrably they never worked. They were always admitted to Bill Lindbergh's annual Christmas party for the unemployed.

There was, of course, a fringe, as ever with Bohemia, that touched on the criminal, that Bohemian celebration of outlaws and deviants and other dodgy types. I was wary of that aspect of the Push. As I was wary of their knee jerk anti-communism and their espousal of free market economics. In retrospect it all appears more like an indoctrination program than a force for radical change. Anyway, it wasn't the social theorizing that attracted me to the Push. It was the girls. I was not interested in philosophical debate or anarchist theory.

It is difficult to capture the tone and idiom of the Push. All too readily it can sound like pseud's corner: maybe it often did.

'Why is it that there are no novels about the Push?' Jim Baker, one of the self-appointed leaders would ask. Rumour was that he had written one himself. An answer was not expected because he had the answer. The Push had all the answers. 'Is it because we are too critical, too sceptical and questioning? Are we too incisive and illusion-free for novelists to deal with us?'

The Push was always a mass of contradictions. Unrelenting in is refusal to recognize the validity of any authority, it had its well-defined pecking order with its stars and its leaders. Committed to espousing critical thinking, and to acting out the freedoms that philosophers had discussed merely in

theory, its gatherings at pubs like the Royal George, the Newcastle and the Criterion were more often fabled as sites of critical drinking. I certainly got into that with enthusiasm. Stephen Knight claimed that my writing a book on Milton's *Paradise Lost* had led me to identify with the blind bard, and I could be found blind every Friday night at the Newcastle. Though never quite as regularly incapacitated as a future state Attorney-General, legless on the pavement against the pub wall, ready for his wife to drive by and collect him.

Premature post-modernists, the libertarians were committed to pluralism with all the fervour of fanatical monotheists. No absolute values were recognized, authorities of church and state were derided, fascism and communism were deemed identical. All political action was seen as a fraud.

'Whoever you vote for, a politician gets in,' they declared, and they had their point in that.

The Push took up a stance in opposition to the social norms. But it was a revolution against the revolution. It operated as a safety valve, siphoning off potential dissent, offering in return sex and drugs, mainly amphetamines in the early days, which never appealed to me, and critical drinking.

The exciting thing about the Push, as I remember it, was the sheer variety and range of people who were attracted by the ambience. The Libertarians may have believed that they as philosophers controlled the Holy Writ, but bohemian Sydney had been flourishing since the early years of *The Bulletin*, and journalists and novelists and poets and film-makers and politicians and academics had continued that tradition. But the Push was the honey-pot that gave Sydney's bohemia its distinctive flavour.

Opposition to American and Australian involvement in the war in Vietnam was the dominant issue of the times and we looked for varieties of ways to protest. Student groups held meetings on the university front lawn, often with a march or demonstration to follow. I was not one for large public meetings. I think I addressed a front lawn rally only once. I was suspicious of orators and rallies and rhetoric. Too close to the methods of those politics we repudiated.

But readings against the war, they were something else. We booked lecture rooms at lunch time and I invited up various writers I had got to know. Others I got to know through these invitations. This was the only time I met the poet Michael Dransfield, at one such occasion, a strange, fey creature. Phillip Roberts, who was a colleague in the department, Robert Adamson and Nigel Roberts all read. Even Frank Moorhouse, ambiguous as his position regarding the war seemed to be. At one stage he talked of going to Saigon as a correspondent, which seemed a strange thing to do if you were opposed to the war. 'How do you know I am opposed to the war?' he asked me. He was most put out when I got him to sign some protest and it appeared in print in a newspaper advertisement, alienating the financial backer of a movie he and Mike Thornhill were planning, and causing the finance to be withdrawn. 'You and your grubby student friends,' he complained.

The readings could be fraught. We held a large scale one with a lot of high profile figures. R. D. FitzGerald became upset at the sexual reference and language of some of the work read. Roland

Robinson, who had been deposed from the Poetry Society and its magazine by a cabal fronted by Adamson, snarled at me as he left the stage and Adamson ascended.

'All Adam's sons are Cain,' he hissed.

I read my story 'The Silence of the Seer' about a guru who gave up language.

'Didn't know what you were on about,' Frank Hardy said, 'then I realized it was about Kenneth Slessor' – Slessor having ceased to write poetry in favour of reactionary editorials in the *Daily Telegraph*.

The readings demonstrated a solidarity within the literary community against Australian and American involvement in the war. They were also an opportunity for those of us busily writing but only just emerging into print to get our work known. It helped find us an audience. It established the groundwork for the great efflorescence of new writing in the 70s. And it enable us to make contact with some of the more established writers, to create some links and continuities rather than generational conflict.

I don't know how many readings I was involved in organizing. There seemed to be a lot. Certainly enough to give me the idea that this flurry of activity might be preserved more permanently. I began to think about publishing a collection of writers against the war, the sort of thing that had happened in the 1930s with the Spanish civil war. I was not alone in planning such a project. David Malouf, who had joined the English department as a senior tutor after school-teaching in Britain, had plans. He was generally known as The Bad Egg, christened as such by Tranter, until Adamson moderated this to The Egg. Not a golden one, though Adamson did publish a slim volume of Malouf's verse at Malouf's expense. A limited edition as a Christmas gift, according to Bob. But that was later. At this point in time Malouf had just published his first slim volume, and now proposed to the downtown Vietnam organizing committee the idea of another slim volume against the war featuring him and a few of his mates like Rodney Hall, Tom Shapcott and Judith Rodriguez. Rae Desmond Jones, the editor of the poetry magazine *Your Friendly Fascist* and later mayor of Ashfield, called them the Queensland mafia.

Malouf's room was across the corridor from the English department common room, and he used to sit in the common room with the door open, leaping up whenever his phone rang and rushing out to answer it. Over time this so irritated Margaret Clunies Ross, later chair of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, that she took to phoning him from the common room and hanging up just before he reached his own phone. Inevitably he became suspicious and turned back quickly one time and caught her. When Malouf's bold, confident signature was inscribed on a section of wet cement near the Great Hall, it was generally suspected to have been Margaret's handiwork rather than that of the Bad Egg himself. Sadly, it was soon erased and the pavement reconcreted.

An elegant slim vol, fine paper and all that, didn't seem the best way to go in my calculations. What was needed was the demonstration of mass opposition to the war. As many writers as possible. As many as we could fit into a book. I proposed this scheme and Ros Cheney, who was on the anti-

war committee, was persuaded. A radio producer with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, she was later involved with Marius Webb and others in establishing the ABC's break-through rock station, 2JJ, later JJJ. J for joint. The 70s.

I think it was Ros who told me that Shirley Cass, the wife of a Victorian parliamentarian, had assembled a similar anthology of Melbourne writers but hadn't been able to find a publisher. I went down to Melbourne and met Shirley. She handed her assembled material over to me. It contained a whole batch of writers I otherwise would not have known how to contact. I added in the Sydney writers who had participated in the readings, wrote letters to others like Christina Stead, Jack Lindsay, Charles Higham, Morris West and Patrick White. Put in Malouf and his mates. And we were in business. It took a while to find a publisher, but in the end Richard Smart took it for Ure Smith, better known as an art publisher, but with a developing general list. The book finally came out in 1971 as *We Took Their Orders and Are Dead*, the title taken from the poem A. D. Hope contributed. It represented an amazing cross-section of writers, an unambiguous declaration of the widespread opposition to an appalling war.

Not everyone opposed the war. James McAuley, the poet and editor of the CIA funded *Quadrant*, notoriously supported it. He was a friend of Leonie Kramer, who had replaced Wilkes as professor of Australian literature, when Wilkes had replaced Goldberg as professor of English Literature. One time she gave a lunch for McAuley in the staff club and invited most, if not all, of the department staff, except for me. Presumably she wanted to avoid any confrontation. I saw them down the far end of the club as I was pouring my coffee from the coffee urn. McAuley got up from the table and approached me. He introduced himself and said, 'My daughter is studying *Paradise Lost*, and she read your book on it and found it most helpful.' Or some such words. McAuley is often demonized; but I found this an an unforgettable gesture in the midst of what were often bitter conflicts.

They were ambiguous times, those years of protest. Academic staff now keep clear of students for fear of being accused of inappropriate behaviour. But one of the unique aspects of the radical sixties and seventies was the way staff and students from different faculties worked together, sharing knowledge and co-operating on activist issues. Charles Birch the biologist was always active in the anti-war movement. So were Stephen Knight and Terry Sturm from the English department, Bob May from Physics, later chief scientific adviser to the British government, Warren Osmond, Peter King and Terry Irving from Government, and Wal Suchting from Philosophy. Student activists included Rowan Cahill, Ann Curthoys, Jon Landau, Gillian Leahy, Damien White, Hall Greenland, Meredith Burgmann, Deirdre Ferguson, Russell Darnley and many others. Some I worked closely with, others I knew only peripherally. The degree of involvement and commitment varied from person to person and issue to issue, and I forget the various factional disagreements, though they were there.

Apart from protest meetings, marches and readings, we looked for other ways of opposing the war. One time we circulated a letter proposing an academic strike. It was most unlikely that such a

proposal would get much support. But by announcing that we were proposing it we thought we might achieve some reaction. We did, and were duly denounced in state parliament. I co-signed the letter with Charles Birch, who was somewhat annoyed that we hadn't asked his permission before using his name.

I remember the draft resister Mike Jones and his wife taking refuge in my house at Drummoyne, Mike playing military marches, and occasionally phoning the Commonwealth Police from my university room to taunt them, while they no doubt attempted to trace the call. The Indian historian Soumyen Mukherjee politely told the Commonwealth Police that he couldn't help them when they showed him photographs of students who were supposed to have helped the draft dodger Michael Matteson escape over the quadrangle roof after a front lawn rally on campus.

'Oh! All these white faces, they all look the same to me.'

Much of what passed for radicalism that developed along with the anti-war protests was in essence an agenda for cultural modernisation, a rejection of the religious based morality and ethics on which society was based. The ferment led to the dissolution of the co-operative endeavour of welfare socialism into a pluralism of self-interest groups, atomized consumers for the products of the backers of the good-for-business Labor and Liberal parties. The new values were cash values. Sexual liberation and anti-censorship protest were readily exploited by media moguls to flood the news-stands with girlie magazines featuring full frontal nudity. Television offered bare breasts to encourage the replacement of black and white television sets with the newly available colour.

The often slavish imitation of causes and protests from the USA helped prepare the ground for a ready acceptance of the whole counter culture of music, comix, and movies. It was a crucial stage in the shift of cultural consumption from the UK to the USA. Drugs were suddenly fashionable. Were they promoted and distributed in order to narcotize and incapacitate protestors and so preserve the existing order? Or were they the ultimate capitalist product, continued consumption ensured through their addictive potential? The drug culture provided a new cash crop for criminal elements and their establishment financiers.

How authentic were the activists? Some were romantic idealists, some political careerists, some shrewd opportunists. Some mutated into right-wing stalwarts. Some were special branch provocateurs or ASIO informers, voluntary or coerced. ASIO photographs of the black power marches posted on Facebook by Garry Foley show the detailed surveillance being undertaken. Many of the young celebrities were involved because it was the fashion – before catching the next waves of feminism, gay liberation, post-structuralism, global warming. The spirit of those times viewed with suspicion the office holders of the Student Unions, and Student Representative Councils, seeing them as being little different from the Vice-Chancellorial and professorial establishment. The emphasis was on collectivism and causes, not on grandstanding. Nonetheless, the prefects tried running the show. Arguably, they won.

It all faded away. The movement was complicit in its own disempowerment. The vigorous and

successful demands for continuous assessment to replace end of year examinations resulted in little time being left available for student political activities. And staff are now continuously occupied in assessment with little time for research – unless they apply for funding from some research council to give them teaching relief. But research grant applications require approval of the topic. Bye bye academic freedom. Free education was bit by bit abolished, fees were introduced, most students now have part time jobs and fit their courses in around the job requirements. The time for participation in student activities, political, literary, theatrical, is no longer available.

Now we are left with a disengagement from all political processes and their self-proclaimed representatives, a heritage of suspicion, disillusion, and nihilism.

Off campus, these were the Balmain days. When in 1994 the Balmain Tigers left the suburb after 86 years, *The Daily Telegraph-Mirror* asked me to write a memorial piece.

Would Balmain ever be the same? I asked. Would the the garbos still wear their black and gold socks and their black and gold jerseys and buzz through the early morning streets like oversized bees?

I never did get to see the Tigers play. People used to say the great thing about football is going to the game and drinking afterwards. We skipped the game and just drank. The Forth and Clyde, the Dry Dock, the William Wallace, the London, the Exchange ... The hours we spent; that's where we planned the great novels, the great movies, the magnificent articles, the great anti-war demonstrations.

And then at closing time Murray Syme, sacked from the public service for convening an anti-war protest and later someone big at Citibank, would go around asking 'Where's the party?' And then he'd go round a second time and tell you where it was.

Sometimes it turned out to be at your place and they welcomed you in cheerfully. Frank Moorhouse climbed a tree when the party came to his place in Ewenton street. I seem to remember joining him up above the throng. It was a lovely old tree.

Another time a band of merry pranksters used my name to gain entrance to a party and overwhelmed it. I got there to be greeted by an enraged host, shouting out, 'Will all Michael Wilding's friends please leave.' It left some people quite conflicted, they told me.

This was when Balmain meant somewhere cheap to live and so the writers flooded in. It was amazingly tolerant. Everyone left you alone. Except the poets. They came round and read their poems to you over breakfast.

For a long time there were lots of pubs but no restaurants. Then Irina Dunn opened *L'Ironique* and Murray Syme opened *The Balmain Tiger* curry house. Murray would join your table and drink whatever you'd brought with you while Jules the chef slit his wrists across the road in Gladstone Park.

We had readings on the waterfront. If you didn't like what was being read, you threw things. We learned to write better. Or duck quicker.

It began to change when people started buying houses instead of renting them. They bought and

sold and made a lot of money. The rest of us moved out. Now it's beautiful and gentrified. I took Don Graham round there, the man who wrote the life of Audie Murphy and later wrote a study of the stories I wrote in those days. He loved it. He bought a souvenir Tigers jersey.

'We had ten good years,' I said.

'That's all you ever get,' he said. 'Ten good years and the rest you can forget.'

I'd met Frank Moorhouse back in 1964, either down at the Newcastle where he drank or the Workers Educational Association office nearby where he was employed, introduced to him by Don Anderson. Here was a fellow short story writer. Indeed Frank even proclaimed a total and undying commitment to the short story and a refusal to contemplate the novel. In those days.

Back then the short story was still the jewel in the crown of Australian literature. But in these republican times the crown has tarnished and the jewels seemed to have been sold of along with the silver. No longer do the weekly magazines publish stories. No longer do the weekly magazines exist. The quarterlies have dropped to three issues a year, some to merely one. Anthologies are no longer popular in the eyes of the accountants directing the globalized publishing conglomerates, because they don't make enough money. But back then things seemed different. I tried writing a novel, indeed I did write one, but it wasn't any good. I was more successful with stories, publishing a couple in *London Magazine*.

Our shared interest in writing formed the basis of a friendship between Frank and me. We talked less about writing than about getting published, where to place stories, how to establish ourselves. Though there was inevitably a tension. We didn't share much of the same taste in the writers we read. Nor did we have the same social or political views, though it took me a while to realize that. My unthought emotional commitment to the left, my loyalty to what I perceive as my working class roots, my quasi-Christian pacifism, despite no longer holding to any religious beliefs, all of this was pretty well anathema to Frank's middle class background and libertarian opposition to socialist ideologies. I just assumed writers were naturally of the left. It took me years to realize that many had no position other than self-interest, and that the politically astute were astute enough to avoid any political pronouncements at all.

I'd corresponded with Frank from England and when I returned I stayed with him in his house in Balmain while I looked for somewhere to live with Margaret who on her return was staying with her parents. It wasn't Frank's house, in fact, but Gillian Burnett's, his current girlfriend. I recall Frank presenting her with the entire seven drafts of a story he had written as a gift for her to treasure and preserve for posterity. She was unimpressed. At this stage she was living in a flat in the Cross. But at some stage she demanded the house back. I'm not sure whether that focussed my mind on getting somewhere to live with Margaret, or whether Margaret and I were already living in Drummoyne and Frank, evicted by Gillian, came to stay. Whatever, the consequence of his arrival was that Margaret moved out. I suspected this may have been provoked by her discovery that Frank had offered me an

office he rented in the Cross to take a girl to. I also suspected Frank might have conveyed this information to Margaret. But I could have been wrong. In due course I evicted Frank, and Margaret returned.

Frank's homosexuality was something it took me a while to realize. 'Why does he keep KY jelly beside the bed?' the girl kept asking, and I had no idea why. Gillian and his other ex girl friends joked about our friendship, but I thought that was merely a joke and didn't detect the dark undercurrents. His proud announcement that he had opened the dancing at the Purple Onion meant nothing to me, night clubs never part of my world. As far as I knew his late night runs in Rushcutters Bay park were just part of his exercise regimen.

Then in the little house in Balmain he started putting the hard word on me. I declined, using the line that many a girl had used on me, that it would spoil our friendship. 'You know, we'd break up, and then it would be difficult to be friends, and the friendship is the important thing.' He was unimpressed by that argument. I was unattracted by his solicitations. But they continued.

Finally, one night at the Drummoyne house, drunk or stoned after the pub or a party, I decided, well, these were experimental times, maybe I should experiment. I climbed into his bed. He lay there inert. I reached out in the direction of his genitals but encountered nothing. Significant absence, as the literary theorists put it. Then one of us fell out of the bed. It was a narrow one. I don't know whether it was then that peering over the side to see where he had fallen, or lying on the floor looking under the bed, I saw the rifle.

'What's this?' I asked.

'A gun,' he said.

I can't remember what if anything he said it was for. Maybe he pleaded self-defence. The idea of someone living in my spare room with a loaded gun beneath the bed was alarming. I imagined it was loaded. No point having it there if it wasn't.

I recalled the dark hints he gave from time to time. 'There are aspects of my life you wouldn't want to know about,' he once announced. I was puzzled as to what they might be. I never knew, though I came to harbour grim suspicions.

And that was it. End of story. Years later, three decades or more, he announced in an interview in *The Weekend Australian* that he and I had been lovers. We hadn't. Someone sent me an email drawing my attention to the article and suggesting that I should sue. That seemed a bad idea. Oscar Wilde and all that, bringing disaster on himself by suing the marquess of Queensberry. And on what grounds would I sue? Defamation? 'So, you claim that allegations of a homosexual relationship are defamatory. Does that mean you are homophobic?' He had me over the proverbial barrel. Clever work, Frank.

The Books editor, Deborah Hope, said I could do nothing and let people believe it, I could write a piece in response, or I could give her an interview. They hadn't interviewed me for years so I chose that option. Promote the new book. They gave Frank the last word. 'What about that girl we shared?'

he asked, implying he and I and some girl had gone to bed together.

We hadn't. On separate occasions we had both slept with her. But not together. A handmaiden of literature, Frank called her, one of his long time girlfriends.

It was she who had invited me to be a *Cosmopolitan* Bachelor of the Month.

'You're not gay are you?' she asked anxiously, 'we have to ask, we had this terrible case not long ago.'

I assured her I wasn't. I can see now why she might have been worried.

'Do I have to take my clothes off?' I asked. Or maybe, 'Do I get to take my clothes off?'

'If you like,' she said. 'We only need a head and shoulders shot for the photo, though.'

Craig Munro at University of Queensland Press had the *Cosmopolitan* column made into a poster as a way of promoting *Living Together*. And I got one fan letter, from someone who later embraced the Prince of Wales in the surf. The closest I ever came to a royal embrace.

One of the drinkers down at the Newcastle was Ron Smith. An American, he had come to Australia with his wife to escape nuclear annihilation. Later he realized it was his wife he was trying to escape, he told me, and they separated. He was editing a girlie magazine called *Squire*, and amongst the photographs of bare-breasted girls (but nary a pudenda) he published stories. Frank was publishing there, and Ron asked me to contribute. I was dubious. This was not the way I wanted to appear in print. It did not seem to be the way to literary recognition, let alone success. *Esquire*, maybe. My American agent at the time, Phoebe Lamour I think she was called though that may seem hard to believe, nearly placed my story 'Hector and Freddie' with *Esquire*; the fiction editor said he was tempted but in the end he sensed a disturbing deracination. Whatever he meant by that. No doubt it described me. Maybe rejection by *Esquire* encouraged me to surrender to *Squire*. *Squire* was run by Jack de Lissa, who later had a Bali import business. But it was Ron I dealt with. I gave Ron a couple of early stories set in the UK. The literary quarterlies were somewhat parochial in Australia in the 60s and early 70s. I remember Gerry Wilkes rejecting stories set in the UK for *Southerly* but accepting Australian ones. The girlie magazines didn't really care what they ran between the photographs. So I published stories with UK settings there. I looked for material that was vaguely sexy. Vaguely sexy probably describes much of my early fiction.

Then there was Gareth Powell, who had been a legend in England, the Welsh truck driver who became head of New English Library and got himself a lot of media attention for extravagantly provisioned PR events, plates of caviar and all that, or whatever constituted extravagance in England back then. James Murray, who once interviewed him, told me Powell had been a sergeant in Army Intelligence, then a publisher with Heinemann, and after that a £10 migrant to Australia, bringing his Rolls Royce out as deck cargo. I never saw the Rolls Royce, but now he was in Sydney running *Chance International*, a rather larger magazine both in page size and number of pages than *Squire*, and a slimmer magazine called *Casual*. I published in both. In order to get paid Frank and I would

call into his office in a courtyard off Pitt Street. Generally the accountant had just gone out, the very moment we arrived. Gareth would offer to arm wrestle Frank to see whether Frank was to be paid or not. Frank wrestled away eagerly.

Powell was an enthusiastic, energetic type. He and Frank came up to see me at university one time and looking round the campus bookshop Gareth immediately dispensed advice to the manager on improving the lay out – put revolving stands here at the end of the rows, he told her, exploit this position near the door, it's wasted as it is, and so on. He had a hands on attitude to publishing, not confined to arm-wrestling.

As well as publishing in *Squire* and *Chance* and *Casual*, I also sent *Man* magazine 'The Man of Slow Feeling'. It was one of my attempts to write a sort of Jorge Luis Borges story but it came out more like science fiction. I can't remember why on earth I sent it to *Man* magazine. Maybe because I thought the literary quarterlies wouldn't like it. I published another story in what I think was the last issue of *Man* in January 1974 – it had become dated and old fashioned compared with the new generation of publications like *Playboy* that had now been let into Australia.

There's a story about the professor of anthropology at Sydney University, A. P. Elkin, writing an article on the sexual practices of New Guinea people, in the way anthropologists used to in those days. He asked his secretary to mail it to *Man*, which was also the title of an anthropological journal of scholarly repute. She mailed it to the girlie magazine *Man* by mistake. They happily published it.

The girlie magazines were one aspect of the gradually more permissive sexual climate. Relaxation in censorship controls led to other changes in the media. A new style of glossy women's magazine emerged. Richard Walsh came up with the idea for the first of these, *Pol*, and took it to Gareth Powell. Richard told me, 'The name is really a kind of nod towards Powell and Walsh, which I pronounce "'Wolsh". Unfortunately I fell out with Gareth about 18 months after we started – I was supposed to have a share of the ownership, but he never formalised it.'

More liberated, more up-market, than the existing women's magazines, *Pol* and its successors were designed to attract a more sophisticated, more educated readership. Here was another outlet for our writing, and a place to be reviewed and interviewed. Vicki, Adamson and I all found ourselves in their pages. Maggie Mackeig, who succeeded Richard as editor of *Pol*, published an excerpt from my first novel, *Living Together*, *Vogue Australia* published an excerpt from *The Short Story Embassy*, and *Cosmopolitan* gave me that spot as Bachelor of the Month. The Packer organization, having failed to acquire the Australian rights to *Cosmopolitan*, established its own rival, *Cleo*, and Elisabeth Wynhausen published an interview with me there, 'Wild Man of Letters'.

It was all very strange, and became stranger when a journalist came to me at university with a project for one of the magazines. She showed me a series of photographic transparencies of men and women in various stages of undress and sexual engagement, always an odd number. The idea was that I would give her my thoughts, reactions, fantasies and she would write up a story. I don't know that she ever made it quite clear which magazine this was for. Certainly no such story ever appeared that I

noticed. Years later I wondered if it might have been a profiling exercise by some dubious agency. But at the time I decided it was a great opportunity to write about, and I used the episode and its fantastic elaboration as the trigger for *Scenic Drive*. Dylan has a line about 'your magazine husband' which gave me the title for the first story, 'My Magazine Lady.' Here was a new theme, an exploration of the continuity between the high end glossy women's magazines coming out then, and the sleazy end inhabited by the girlie magazines; the performance art and *avant garde* sexual themes of art and movies at one acceptable end, and the vampire vamp porn of Ron Smith's world at the other. It gave me the opportunity to ask, what if any are the differences? What are our values? Is this art? or porn? or hypocrisy? It was also all part of the 'where can I publish, where can I find my audience?' issues.

So the magazine ladies were part of the milieu I was inhabiting, exploring, thinking about and of course fantasising about. The journalistic young ladies emanated a pervasive sexuality. Or I imagined they did. This was all interesting, too, in that the English tradition I came from had a hierarchy of values, deemed to be exclusive. So to publish fiction across the board in literary quarterlies, women's magazines, girlie magazines, *avant garde* little magazines and alternative underground papers was something new, something taboo breaking. Also the women's magazines were the beginning of a celebrity culture, though we didn't call it that then, not least in their celebration of themselves. Those days are now historical. The glossy women's magazines don't mess with male writers much any more – we're no longer on the agenda.

Sexual conventions were amongst the social issues of the time that the libertarians confronted. Maybe their only, certainly their major, confrontation. The libertarian line was that there should be no sexual jealousy, and women should exercise the same sexual freedom as men. They also insisted there should be no 'shoulds', so I learned to edit them out of my writing as far as possible.

Their sexual ideology was a major sexual breakthrough, as a number of commentators have testified. It was certainly a breakthrough for the men. Lots of sexually liberated women down at the pub. Who could proposition you. It didn't have to be the other way round with women having to wait to be asked. I remember my Glaswegian friend Robert Cummings commenting on one of my stories in which a female person asks the protagonist for a fuck. 'Is this typical of Australia?' he asked in some amazement. Down amongst the Libertarians it was. Not all the time. Not necessarily consistently. But some of the time. There was a strong move to women's independence in the Push. Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan and Helen Gurley Brown were the authorities cited. Not that the Libertarians accepted authority.

It was all a mark of sexual liberation. Why should women deny or conceal their sexuality? Why shouldn't they proudly bare all? So they did. They rejected bourgeois taboos, repressive conventions. David Perry's photographs of Sue Robertson and Rita Georgin duly appeared in *Squire*, part of a promotional hype for the underground film activities they were involved in. Lynne Segal was,

somewhat obscurely, naked on the cover of Frank's first book, published by the short-lived imprint Gareth Powell and Associates. I never did know who the Associates were. It was all seen as empowering rather than exploitative. And part of the Push agenda on sexuality. The issue was not women's liberation but human liberation. We had all been repressed and fucked up, now we could all be free. It was in this context that Germaine a few years later posed naked in *Screw*. An expression of the libertarianism that had formed her social thinking way before she emerged as a feminist with *The Female Eunuch*.

With the development of the women's movement a new critique emerged. *Playboy* and *Penthouse* that had begun to flourish in the post contraceptive pill sexual freedom years of the sixties were now stigmatised as sexist. Girlie magazines were deemed exploitative of women. When *Playboy* and *Penthouse* finally appeared in Australia with local editions, I never contributed to them. Others did. But the women's movement critique reinforced my own unease about them. The fact that a number of the women I had known had modelled for *Squire* meant that I wasn't sure about the exploitation issue. I guess it all depended on the attitude with which you went into it. Maybe. Pretty certainly, as the magazines multiplied, there was exploitation, naive young hopefuls thinking this was the way to Hollywood or stardom. But wasn't Hollywood the same? And much else?

But mainly I felt that the whole enterprise was sad. Sad when it involved innocents with unreal and unrealizable expectations, sad in its purchasers. Who would buy girlie magazines? We knew very well that no one really bought them to read the stories. If only. The fact that most purchasers never even glanced at the stories made it clear that there was no point in writing for them. Except for the money. But for me the money was never the issue. I had a day job. The point was recognition, acceptance as a writer. I didn't see the acceptance I wanted was going to come from girlie magazines. Though I could have been wrong. And who would look at girlie magazines if they could get the real thing? If you lived a sexually liberated life, why would you need girlie magazines? That was the healthily liberated sex life view of the matter. And the milieu of the libertarians, the Push, the pub, offered its sexually liberated world. That was the model for all society. A healthy society would not need girlie magazines. And as our society progressed, girlie magazines, like the state, would wither away. There are, of course, certain questionable assumptions here. I am not unaware of them. But that was how I felt by the mid-seventies. In terms of social development, it hasn't quite happened like that. By 1997 there were 910,470 copies of men's magazines sold in Australia. By 2005 slightly more than five million. By the end of 2009 it was about 9.2 million, according to Sally Jackson in *The Australian*, 7 June 2010. After which circulations began to decline and titles to cease publication, as the the internet and phone apps made accessible any photograph imaginable, free from distracting fiction.

Ron Smith I continued to meet down at the pub over the years. He was a science fiction fan and he was writing SF stories together with John Baxter under the name of Martin Loran. Pulp SF. Maybe true SF is pulp. Back at the Worcester Writers' Circle when I had just left school I met one of the

original pulp writers, Frank Rayer, who had begun writing for *Popular Mechanics* on how to build your own radio magazines before moving on to science fiction.

I introduced Ron to a girl I knew. I had designs on her, but was hovering off in my not infrequent nervous way. I had my various inhibitions and guilts. Ron didn't. He began an affair with her. She was soon recruited into typing up the Martin Loran stories.

'They're terrible,' she told me. 'The spelling, the grammar ...'

Maybe even the plots. She was correcting the stories, anyway, improving them.

'They never notice,' she said.

It gave me the idea for 'The Words She Types' in which the typist progresses from correcting the careless typescripts she is given to receiving blank pages and writing the stories herself.

Ron moved on to soft porn photo books with narrative captions. I declined his invitation to be a model, but I let him stay with me one time when he was homeless and I was living in a house perched on a waterfront cliff at Seaforth. Finding him lying in bed with his vampire make-up still on, presumably from a photo-shoot but who knows, gave me the material for 'The Vampire's Assistant at the 139 Steps'. The *Sydney Morning Herald* published it with a Martin Sharp illustration, which I asked Martin if I could use for the cover of *Scenic Drive*. Instead, with typical generosity, he gave me entirely new art for both front and back cover.

Ron claimed to have ghosted one if not more Carter Brown thrillers. He took a dislike to the private eye and at the end of the book left him maimed and mutilated by lesbians.

'We'll see how whoever they hire to write the next volume gets round that,' he said with satisfaction.

John Baxter has an affectionate memoir of Ron in *A Pound of Paper*.

In due course Ron moved out of editing girlie magazines, found finance he said from Gordon Barton who was the new owner of Angus & Robertson, and went to the states, and shipped back a container full of remaindered books. For years English language publishing had been divided into two markets. Britain and the Commonwealth was one, the USA and the rest of the world was the other. Books from American publishers were not available in Australia. American authors could only be read when republished by British publishers. Remaindering began to change all that. Obscure academic tomes, esoteric modernists, novelists of ill repute and no repute, extravagant art books were all suddenly available, and at a fraction of their original price. An entire new area of cultural production was on display, and we eagerly bought it. There was a ready market for readers starved of this recondite material, the regular pabulum of the American college bookstores, the Beats, Black Mountain, Black Panthers, college paperbacks, overstocks of the bankrupt and the covertly funded. It was an exciting feature of Abbey's bookshop in the old, unrestored Queen Victoria Building.

Ron let some of his bookish friends from the pub pick over the spoils he had imported. Cheap classic reprints were jumbled in with existentialist plays and Dadaist erotica, fantasy and science

fiction were bundled together with Grove Press paperbacks – the height of the commercial avant-garde in those days. We grabbed at them greedily, as he knew we would.

It all seemed new and radical. It was certainly different from the traditional English product. And there was a cunning in it. This was the hard to get, the for so long repressed and denied, and it was arriving as if smuggled in, sold not through the decaying old and established bookshops that had begun to seem so boring, but in ramshackle bargain hunters' outlets, and shops specializing in the unlikely mixture of pornography and radical politics, like Bob Gould's Third World Bookshop in Goulburn Street. Later, when American values had pretty well saturated Australian society, it seemed less challenging; but by then the taste had been formed. Breaking the international publishers' cartel agreements, marketed like illegal drugs, remainders had created their addiction.

These were the heady years of the sixties and seventies. The pubs were still shut on Sundays. So were most retail shops. But Max Harris's Mary Martin's remainder shops somehow got around the Sunday trading regulations. Going to Mary Martins was one of the few things to do on a rainy weekend. We obsessive book collectors would make our way into the city and, amidst the exotic teas and the incense and the muted classical music, purchase some bargain price life of a literary genius or some obscure *nouveau roman.*

And then there was Clouston and Hall's University Remainders. They would drive down from their Canberra warehouse in a huge pantechnicon, hire some rooms for a weekend in the university union, and lay out on trestle tables all the treasures of the West. The most obscure academic studies, translations of the rarest and remotest literary achievements of central Europe awaited you. And you would meet your fellow obsessives, reviewers like Carl Harrison-Ford, printers and publishers like Roger Barnes, scouring the tables with the focussed attention of shell collectors on a windswept beach.

As Australian publishing expanded and more books were published locally, so were more remaindered. This allowed the shameful pleasure of finding titles by your closest friends and oldest rivals, on sale for a dollar each. But it is dangerous to gloat; who knows but that the next title you turn up might be one of your own. Who can forget Andy Garcia's novelist in *The Man From Elysian Fields?* One minute he discovers his novel in the remainder bin, the next he is working for Mick Jagger in a male escort service.

And if you don't discover your own books in the remainder tray, does that mean that they are still selling well, or, a possibility too dreadful to contemplate, they have been irretrievably pulped into egg cartons?

With years of tunnelling through second hand bookshops and remainder shops, I began to assemble a marvellous library. It was eccentric, no doubt about that. It represented the forgotten and the never known, the marginal and the minority. The standard centre of our literary culture might have been a bit thin on my shelves in some areas. But the standard culture could always be found in the libraries. And if you desperately needed it you could buy it at full price. But oh, what jewels of the

periphery, what a display of the bizarre and the abandoned I had found.

Like everything else, remaindering evolved. Once retail price maintenance was abolished, all books could be discounted. They no longer had to be sold at the price the publisher set. Remaindering lost its cowboy and cowgirl aspect and became structured into the business. Instant remaindering was developed – remainder chains contracted to buy overruns of new bestsellers as soon as they were printed. I still work my way through the remainder shops. I still compulsively browse through the bargain racks outside newsagents. There is not as much academic esoterica these days, but there are lots of good thrillers.

By 1969 the Libertarians had descended on the Forth and Clyde hotel in Balmain for weekend drinking. Here they intersected with various literary types living in Balmain like Nigel Roberts, Robert Adamson, Vicki Viidikas and Robyn Ravlich. Many of the Balmain types were as happy smoking a joint as drinking a beer. Many enjoyed both. There was a shared culture of the alternative. Though Nigel was an unregenerate carnivore, adamant that nobody should call him a quiche eating vegetarian. Give a man meat, as the rear bumper stickers put it on those macho Holden utes. One of which he in due course acquired.

We would stand out on the pavement on a sunny Saturday afternoon, looking across at the old deserted dry dock, keeping out of the way of the bikies who also drank there. Maybe we would go down to Nigel's place afterwards. Nigel and Johnny Goodall and Terry Gilmore produced an occasional poetry magazine called *Free Poetry*. Like the Libertarian's *Broadsheet*, it was printed by a duplicator on foolscap paper, and then the pages stitched together by a sewing machine, probably by Nigel's wife, Davnet. This was a new poetry compared to most of what had been appearing in Australia. Influenced by the Beat poets and Nigel's enthusiasm for Douglas Blazek, at its best if captured the idiom of the spoken language, laconic, witty, hip, cool. My own single contribution, the story 'A Month in the Country', seemed very old world and literary in it style in that context. It was an important magazine. It opened up contemporary writing, made it looser and more spontaneous and idiomatic. It helped me develop from a more formal, traditional English style to a lighter, fresher manner. Nigel's own work was characteristic of the mode, witty, sardonic, allusive and, at its best, sharp and edgy. Like the one called 'After / The Moratorium Reading':

the marie antoinette / slice
of cake / was
awarded to
who ever said
after this reading / let's
get it on / at Michael's place / I heard
that guy

from Canberra's got
some farout
vietnamese
shit.

In the version he gave me for the anti-war anthology I edited, I was named as 'Wilding'. The pleasure of being featured in a poem co-existed alongside the suspicion of the authorial intentions, dobbed in as part of that alternative, cool, dope smoking milieu, oppositional to the war and the criminalization of marijuana, one of the boys, a person of interest, as the police put it. It was an idiom no less exploitative of ambiguities than that of my admired Henry James. I bobbed around between the two traditions, happily stoned, cheerfully drunk, a brave new world of promiscuity and excess and appalling hangovers and emotional disorder, the systematic deregulation of the senses mandatory for the followers of Rimbaud and the enthusiasts for Brautigan. I still fondly recall Nigel's great wooden kitchen table, the poetry magazines, the art books, the bowl of fruit, the stash of dope, the constant stream of visitors, people dropping by from the pub and wandering back there again, calling in from interstate, welcome to the crash pad, the sexual duplicities, the lies, the evasions, the guilt, the remorse and back again next weekend. Indeed, back again often enough during the week. A perpetual playtime, a holiday without end. It seemed like a great idea at the time. Still doesn't seem all that bad.

When I came to write *Pacific Highway* at the end of the seventies, 1977, this was the world I recalled, Nigel endlessly working on his house, collecting found materials from the streets of Balmain and Rozelle, who knew where or how, replacing walls and staircases with recycled timbers, discovering old advertisements enamelled on sheets of metal. Collage was part of the art of the time. It fed into my own writing, this enthusiasm for cut-ups, recycling, intertextuality, offering the opportunities for tonal difference, alongside the spontaneous arias and paragraphic architectural constructions from Milton or Henry James. I set *Pacific Highway* in the Northern Rivers district of New South Wales but many of the episodes were based on events around Balmain. Visitors from the hippy settlements and alternative communities beyond Byron were often passing through, bearing gifts.

Nigel Krauth asked me one time about alcohol and literary creativity. We certainly drank a fair amount. Alcohol was what they served in pubs, and pubs were where I liked to hang out and talk to people, other writers and filmmakers and editors and girls, and get involved in situations I later wrote about. And the same with the parties afterwards, more alcohol and things to write about. Alcohol fuelled the book launches where we used to try and promote our new books. So alcohol was and undoubtedly is a significant part of the literary life. But in itself I never found alcohol useful for the process of writing. Writing when drinking has never seemed to me the way to go. And if I ever got any good ideas for writing when drunk, I rarely remembered them. When Marcus Clarke dosed himself up on hashish and wrote 'Cannabis Indica' in Melbourne in 1868, he remarked: 'The drug

seems to unlock the doors of thought.' But I don't recall ever finding that was the case with alcohol.

It was probably through Nigel Roberts, or down at the Forth and Clyde, that I met Robert Adamson – or Bob as he was known in those days, before he rebranded himself. He had first sprung on the literary world as a prison poet. In *Inside Out*, the third version of his confessions of his life of crime and gaol, he writes that I seemed wary of him: 'I grew wary of Wilding too: if he thought I was some sort of drug-taking crim, I thought he was a transplanted English academic. But that all changed when I heard him read.' There is no doubt that I was wary of him. Still am, for that matter. There was something of a vogue for writers who had been in prison in those years: Kevin Gilbert, Kevin Mackey, Jim McNeill, Max Williams. So many middle-class girls of that time did their prison visiting and married their prisoner. I never shared that romanticisation of the imprisoned and criminal.

But Bob had a true poetic gift. Indeed he still does, even if so much of the time it doesn't seem applied to much in the way of content any more. Over the years I tried to persuade him into writing about things other than writing, and over the years he steadfastly resisted my persuasions. Perhaps he was wiser than I was. The way to literary success and acceptance, an article in *Stand* magazine about Seamus Heaney once announced, was via the old Irish proverb, 'Whatever you say, say nothing.' I introduced Bob to Seamus Heaney years later and they got along famously. Bob even visited him in Ireland. If winning prizes or government funding is the height of your literary ambition, then this is the way to go. Bob was not alone in that. It was something he shared with most of the Australian literary pantheon. The tragedy was that he had a talent that might have transcended the self-censorship and evasions that characterize the free market of our world of content free speech. Maybe all those painful years of boys homes and prison had taught him the reality of the system and shown him a way not only to survive, but to triumph. And triumph he did.

Anyway, all that was in the future. In 1969 he was known for his prison poems, which dealt, or at least seemed to, with the reality of things. An aura of jailhouse, junk and homosexuality, robbery and violence, gave him the cachet of a rebel, an outsider. Someone you would certainly be wary of if you had any sense.

It was Bob who introduced me to the music and lyrics of Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen. His enthusiasm for them was immense. Other songwriters too, but they were the ones who made the most lasting impression on me. Bob's raves about lyrics and poetry were truly phenomenal. He was a natural teacher. No one I knew read more deeply in contemporary poetry. He pored over the Americans hour after hour. He could drive you mad with his remorselessness. But you knew you were in the presence of something very rare. It issued in powerful poetry. There is no doubt about that.

'But what good came of it at last?' said Little Peterkin.

''Ah, that I cannot say, said he, 'but 'twas a famous victory.'

It was the victory of the postmodern, the art of self-referentialism, the construct, the con, the illusion, the imagination, the glorious lie.

Deborah, who was married to Bob in the 80s, says it was John Tranter who put him onto Mallarmé, saying 'This will drive you mad.' Tranter was another figure round the traps, though lacking in Bob's charisma or creativity. The Rimbaud of the Newcastle, Lee Cataldi called him, perhaps sardonically. To me this aesthetic was all too much that of the Emperor's new clothes, Antipodean Ashberries parading around in an empty theatre. But perhaps that was the art of it all, the art of illusion. It was not confined to poetry. I once said to an unsurprisingly unresponsive Peter Carey that I understood what he was doing with *Oscar and Lucinda*, it was all made up and all about nothing, the image without signification, the narrative without purpose, the art of advertising. Carey, who came from that world, was able to translate it to the market-place, which I suppose was what it was really about. With the poets, who had no market presence, it was all about the art of self-advertising and accessing the public purse.

That was what people said about Bob, how he spent his first literature board grant on buying a Mustang. Not even a real horse, that might have appealed to Adam Lindsay Gordon, but a mass-produced Ford. One time he was accused of misappropriating Poetry Society funds. He handled that well, stripping himself naked on a university lawn to prove he had nothing to hide. Well, Ginsberg was always doing that. But Bob outstripped him, removing his false teeth as a *coup-de-grace*. These were mythic stories that got him talked about. But wouldn't it have been better, Deborah asked, if it was the poems that people talked about?

Amidst it all he edited *New Poetry* with a commitment unequalled in any other poetry magazine. He lived poetry, his entire working day. Even if he didn't wake up till late afternoon. He pored over the manuscript submissions. His editing was obsessive and hands on and expanded to take up the time available and more and drove everyone close to despair and desperation who tried to work with him. But when the magazine came out, usually late, it was always alive and exciting and good to feel and touch and read. He cared about print and paper, cared in a way that seemed to me unnecessary and time-wasting and uneconomical and altogether rather ridiculous. But there was no doubt that he cared. And there was no doubt that we looked forward to each issue. Of how many magazines could it be said that every issue was eagerly awaited? But we all eagerly awaited and grabbed and read *New Poetry* – whether or not we were poets. Years later I suggested him as poetry editor for another little magazine, *Ulitarra*, and Angelo Loukakis made him poetry editor of Angus & Robertson. No one ever did such jobs better. His lack of any agenda of commitment to political positions or social issues or religious morality, indeed to any known values other than poetry, made him a unique poetry editor and he had a profound effect on encouraging and fostering the creativity of the seventies and eighties. But there were times when I called him a treacherous little sod and a boring nuisance and on one occasion I broke his arm when he stuck it through my window late at night and wouldn't go away.

Bob asked me to judge the *New Poetry* poetry prize one year, and we gave the award to John Forbes for his 'Four Heads and how to do them.' Later I pointed Forbes to the Arthur Maquarie travelling fellowship administered by the English Department. Preference was supposed to go to a

poet, though usually it went to a graduate student studying overseas. It enabled Forbes to go cycling round Europe.

It wasn't just a boys' club. The conventions of women not drinking at a bar alone, or not being allowed into the public bar, were gradually breaking down. The Newcastle and the Criterion and the Forth and Clyde were well ahead in these matters, and women were as present and forceful as men. The singles' bar mentality had not evolved yet, either. Of course the pubs served as the venue for encounters and assignations and pick-ups. But if someone wanted just to drink there and talk and rage on without being importuned or harassed, there was no problem about it.

Elisabeth Wynhausen was one of the first people I met at the Forth and Clyde. She used to drink there at weekends and occasional evenings with Sandra Levy, both of them schoolteachers, both of them completing degrees and diplomas of education at the university. Sandra joined the ABC's education department, moved across to features, and then to film and television production. Betty, similarly, was to leave teaching for journalism, and become Elisabeth Wynhausen of *The Bulletin*, *The Times,* and *The Australian*. But back in 1969 they were both humble workers at the bottom of the education business.

Elisabeth came to see me at university when she was writing her memoir, *Manly Girls*.

'I'm looking up all my old fucks while I can still remember who they were,' she announced. She cast a beady eye along the shelves. 'What's this shit on your shelves, Mao, Marijuana, Marx, Henry Miller,' she intoned. 'Are you sure you want this stuff on display where people can see it?' In the triumphant brave new world order, I wasn't so sure. They were an invitation for a purge, of them or me.

I feature in Elisabeth's memoir as the mad Englishman. According to *Manly Girls* 'He had once arrived unannounced, by shinnying up the drainpipe and coming into the bedroom from the first floor balcony, perhaps the only sign he gave of being anxious to see me.' The identification with me is confirmed by another Push member who asks her, 'Remember when Wilding got into your room by climbing up the drainpipe?'

I think this was a misinterpretation of some comment made by Michael Thornhill or someone, that in my enthusiasm and susceptibility to womankind I was like a rat up a drainpipe. I never had much of a head for heights. Though in her memoir *Witch Girl and the Push* Lyn Gain records a parallel story of descent rather than ascent: 'Michael Wilding was one of my casual companions during a spell when I was in the lower ground floor front bedroom which could be accessed via French doors if you jumped down the light well from the street. Wilding held the unique privilege, at the time, of being allowed to jump down and tap on the door without previous planning.'

Some time in the seventies I gave Elisabeth a copy of my *Scenic Drive*. She featured in 'The Nembutal Story,' my response to a story of Frank's, one of his more distasteful and destructive contributions to an already fraught relationship. Elisabeth told me, with great delight, that her mother

discovered the book, read it, was appalled, wrapped it in newspaper and dumped it in the garbage.

Somewhere along the line she was living with Don Anderson. Those were the days of open relationships and the last gasp of men's liberation. Don had a regular weekly tryst with Kate Jennings, a vocal speaker for women's rights on the university front lawn, and later editor of an anthology of women's verse, *Mother, I'm Rooted*. Kate was incensed when she discovered that Don and Elisabeth were getting married.

'Be positive,' I advised her as she ran through a catalogue of possible acts of retribution. 'Take a literary solution. Write them an epithalamion for the next Balmain reading.'

I was teaching a course in renaissance poetry at the time and Spenser's wedding ode was one of the gems of the syllabus. She took my advice, and read her poem to great effect.

We were chummy for a while but you learned to be wary of her. She wrote a letter to *Nation Review* denouncing my story 'Death of Fiction Cemetery' as male chauvinist, since the writer in it is presented as a male. It was all of a piece with her speech attacking the 'male war on women' at a rally in opposition to the Vietnam War, which heralded the break up of the protest movement into factionalism, women against men, the old divide and rule strategy.

The Balmain readings were inspired by the Beats and the Liverpool poets. They had begun while I was still in England, but on my return I enthusiastically joined with Nigel Roberts, Moorhouse and Ken Quinnell in helping organize them. Organizing things like that was all very libertarian and alternative. None of the tedious apparatus of committees and funding applications and forms for diversity and gender balance and health and safety. We just did it. Somebody found somebody who was renting one of those old sea captain's houses and persuaded them that holding a reading there on the waterfront would be a cool thing to do, just like a usual Saturday night party where the pub descended like a flock of flying foxes and drank and smoked and talked. Then Nigel and I would cruise around Balmain in my Humber Super Snipe, calling in on the various writers and tell them the event was on. I don't think we even had posters for the early readings. Certainly no paid advertisements. Just word of mouth.

I suggested contacting Les Murray and Geoffrey Lehman. I'd been at the launch of their first book, a collaborative volume, *The Ilex Tree*, but Frank vetoed the idea, saying they lived across the harbour. Border security, immigration checks, *Passport to Pimlico*. It seemed a bit authoritarian and unlibertarian but they belonged to a different gang.

Nancy Keesing, who was chair of the Literature Board of the Australia Council, announced somewhere in the press that if all the money spent on drink and drugs at those readings had been put together we could have published a book. Maybe we could have. But it would have been less fun and who would have bought it? Whereas this almost spontaneous event, all grass roots and community action, created the enthusiasm and goodwill that established the writers and gave them an audience and a readership when their books finally came out. Of course the readings could get raucous. Writers

regularly read stories about characters who were often similar to members of the audience. I remember Irina Dunn reading a story in which at some point she seemed to have changed the names of some of the characters to protect their identities, but hadn't totally changed them: sometimes an original name popped up, making the story rather hard to follow, and stirring up the audience, or those members of it who felt themselves portrayed and travestied, into interjection, heckling and ultimately uproar. If the audience didn't like what was read they let it be known. Cries of disapproval. The odd beer can thrown. But the cans were light, the contents already drunk, no one was going to waste good beer. And the alternative poets and their groupies and acolytes were basically into dope, happily stoned, unlikely to raise an arm to do anything than suck on a joint, certainly not throw anything heavy at anyone, and they would have missed if they tried, anyway. Though water was poured down onto Adamson's head from the cliff top one time. Drenched, he kept on reading. Poets could be remorseless.

As for using all the beer and dope money to get into print, that would have missed the point. These were readings. This was an oral culture. This was the original tradition of the bards, spoken verse to a live audience, not the individual alienation of the printed page. This was the great revival of spoken verse. And not that tediously articulated nonsense on the ABC where they hired actors to intone and declaim in a hammy, theatrical way that missed the meaning and rhythm and life. This was writers reading their own work, stories and poems.

Short stories work well in readings. Excerpts from novels are more problematical. It is not only that all you get is an excerpt, unless it's a particularly determined reader. But the very pace of a novel is different, and a section from a novel, unless it is from a designedly episodic or discontinuous novel, does not always work well. But stories, like poems, are self contained, they have an impact. Frank and I made a point of prioritising 'stories' when we got round to posters and publicity for the Balmain readings. These were not poetry readings. Poetry readings sounded precious. These were story readings. Maybe stories and poems. Prose and verse. The poets were put in their place. Second place.

Though the poets set the tone. It was the poets' dexterity and versatility with language, the focus on language and idiom, the language of men and women as it is spoken, that set the tone. It was this living, contemporary language that livened up the stories we wrote, that massively reinvigorated our writing, that brought our prose into idiomatic focus, that underpinned the new aesthetic of what we were writing. Reading a story to an audience like that at the Balmain readings, you could hear where people responded, you could sense where you were losing them, where what you had written was flat or convoluted or obscure and needed reworking. If you were quick on your feet you could improvise. It had the potential for the spontaneity of jazz. It made our writing alive.

I have always been grateful for the presence of the poets for that. It was from the best of them that I learned about timing and economy and brevity and rhythm. That, together with having to deliver lectures at the university. Again, that was an oral experience. Lecturing I learned how to achieve clarity, how to communicate informally, in ways closer to speech than the usual scholarly books or

journal articles or reviews.

Vicki Viidikas' writing embodied all of those qualities of spontaneity, of contemporaneity, of a seemingly unmediated naturalness, of a lightness of touch. I learned a lot from her. We tried to teach each other. Neither of us held back from showing the world how things should be. Her stories, which I later published with Wild & Woolley as *Wrappings*, were set in the inner city worlds of Balmain, Kings Cross, and East Sydney. Exploring the multifarious experiences of sex and drugs, they capture the ecstasies and liberations and, no less clear eyed, record the exploitations and betrayals. It is a world of exploitation, the economic exploitation of dealers and prostitution, and the exploitation in men-women relationships. But the stories are written with a lightness and liveliness and freshness that make Vicki one of the great originals of Australian fiction. The poems, sharp, fluent and accessible, can be read like sketches. Together the poems and stories build up a memorable portfolio of the Bohemian underbelly of the twentieth century. Her commitment was to the authentic, to writing directly from experience. She wrote as she lived. *Wrappings* appeared before 'women's writing' was on every multinational publisher's agenda. It was a pioneering work in that aspect, but it was equally pioneering in its aesthetic and its technique. The spontaneity of Viidikas' writing had a profound influence on me in the 1970s. She introduced me to the work of Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Anais Nin, but it is her own work that had an especial impact.

Her writing was always from life, from lived experience. She was endlessly scathing about my tweed jacket, my life in the university. Life for her had to be lived in the streets. Preferably in the gutters, it often seemed. But gutters with books. She was not against the world of literature, and she read avidly. It was just that she insisted that writing had first to be lived. I didn't dispute that. In my lectures and tutorials I was constantly affirming that great literature was about and arose from social reality. Yes, of course it was about beauty and language and verbal subtlety and wit and playfulness. Without those qualities you were in the boring realms of sociology and prole-cult. But literature had to be about life, not about the abstract, etiolated realms of 'purely literary values' or 'the imagination.' That we agreed on, that was what brought us together. That we disagreed on what constituted life was what drew us apart. Or maybe not. Maybe it was our selfishnesses and vanities and egos and generally bad behaviour and susceptibility to temptation and diversion and jealousy. I don't know. I have written about Vicki a lot but I am not sure I have ever really understood what went on between us.

Robyn Ravlich was another engaging figure down at the Forth and Clyde. 'It's not a name, it's a riddle,' she said of her name. She was sharing a house with Adamson and Denise, and Bob published a book of her poems in the Prism poets series. Robyn became a producer with the ABC, running a poetry programme for many years. She produced a couple of radio programmes about Vicki some years later, which featured tapes of Vicki reading and talking. I was amazed at how well-spoken and carefully enunciated Vicki sounded. It contradicted how I remembered her, her self-proclaimed image of deprivation, poverty and struggle, her identification with the marginalized and the demi-monde. If

not precisely posh, she still sounded solidly, elocutedly middle-class. But she had turned her back on that world and when I met her she seemed to represent the alternative, the dope-smoking communities of the north coast. Not that she was ever a hippy. She refused any enlistment into any movement. She was never a part of the women's movement; she shared Christina Stead's suspicion of the professional feminists. But her writing understood and shared and effectively promulgated those values of the alternative and of feminism insofar as they represented liberation.

I don't remember how long Vicki and I were together. Not long in the scheme of things. But the impact on my writing and on my world view, on my life, was permanent. At one point I announced to Carl Harrison-Ford down at the Forth and Clyde that we were going to run away to South America and write. South American writing was exciting at the time, Fuentes, Cortazar, Carpentier, Casares, even Borges in a conceptual way. I still remember Carl's horror and his attempts to tell me it was not a sensible thing to do. I knew that. But the idea of throwing it all up for literature and love, what could be more splendid than that? Love in a hut on water and a crust.

I wrote a number of stories about Vicki or in response to stories she had written. Writing about other writers gave a sort of freedom. If they didn't like what you wrote, they could always respond by writing something in return. Whereas non-writers might get upset or consider legal action. So it gave you access to topics that otherwise might have been taboo, or skated over. One time I helped her move house. She had been staying with her ex-husband, the painter Bob Finlayson, and his partner down the coast south of Sydney, Coalcliff or somewhere. It was an amazing region, like all those movies shot on Pacific Coast Highway north of LA up to San Francisco – a winding road along a precipitous drop to the ocean. I remember walking on the beach with Vicki and watching her jump on the cunjevoys revealed at low tide on the rock shelves. They would spurt out water when jumped on. That was the setting I used in 'Thing for the Tentacle Ladies.' We put her mattress on the roof of my Mini and drove up to Sydney with it. She complained that the mouse that lived in it must have fallen out. In *The Short Story Embassy* I tried to capture the tortured complexity of our relationship, the inseparability of literature and life. Carmel Kelly, who helped establish *Tabloid Story*, was furious. 'You never told me you and Frank and Vicki were all living together in that house.'

'We weren't,' I said.

True, we hadn't been. It was a conceptual house, an imaginary embassy, a house of fiction designed to capture the story. An abstract way of dealing with themes too painful to confront directly, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* part of the structural underpinning. It was the first book I wrote completely spontaneously, not knowing as I sat down to write each day what I was going to write, a commitment to the values and aesthetic that Vicki espoused.

Vicki was living down the south coast when the *Embassy* came out. I sent her a copy. It turned out to have been misbound, a whole section of it missing. She was furious. She was sure that I had cut out a section about her that I didn't want her to see. It was the only time that one of the Wild & Woolley books was misbound, and it had to be mine, and the one that I sent to Vicki. In the end we sorted out

that little problem, characteristic of our fraught relationship, though I always felt she maintained some lingering suspicions. She never said what she thought about the book and it was not something I was going to ask. In his foreword to the retrospective collection of her work, *New and Rediscovered*, Kerry Leves remarked: 'Michael's "Valda" – an uncannily accurate mimesis of Vicki's vocal cadences, of the way she spoke – didn't seem to bother the model. When I tried to quiz her about 'Valda', Vicki shrugged – writing was (is) an open field.'

She was lucky there was only a section missing. I nearly lost the whole book. I gave the manuscript soon after I had just finished it to a friend from the pub to read. I suppose I was wanting reassurance. He was someone who was supposed to have some literary taste and judgement, someone who knew what was going on. I don't know what I expected. I certainly didn't expect him to say, 'Sorry cobber, lost your manuscript. My briefcase was stolen in the Forest Lodge.' The pub near the university. Always keep a copy, always keep a back-up. That was one rule I had learned and kept to. This was in the days of carbon-paper. I think I had been smart enough not to lend the top-copy. It was gratifying in a way that he had been carrying the manuscript around with him. Or maybe not.

Such thefts were not uncommon. A colleague in the English Department saw a manuscript of one of Bob Ellis's plays scattered along the street between the pub and the university. Though a proclaimed specialist in drama, she had nonetheless left it there. Ellis had had his briefcase stolen from the pub, he told me. The manuscript had presumably been jettisoned as of no value. Certainly it had been of no value to my drama studies colleague.

As well as writing there was the lure of the movies. Kit Guyatt was a brilliantly talented film maker I met down at the Forth and Clyde. He had made a wonderful documentary about Balmain, with a sequence of himself relaxing with a joint, the sort of thing that made him problematical to funding bodies. He was married to Sandra Levy and I used to visit them in Short Street. Kit and I got funding for a movie about the anti-war movement. Somehow we lost control of it and it got absorbed into a movie about the movement that Richard Brennan was making, *Or Forever Hold Your Peace*, and lost the edge and commitment we had intended. We tried again with a new project. I gave Kit a batch of my stories and he decided the one to film was 'The Phallic Forest'. The filming and editing was pretty much a nightmare, with Kit's entangled emotional life. One time the film for processing went missing when the courier had a motor-cycle accident. Another time the laboratory refused to process it because of content or nudity. On study leave in England I had to buy an editing machine and carry it back as cabin baggage. The Australian Film Institute sent increasingly peremptory demands that we complete the project. Amazingly we did. Sheridan Rogers got us a promo spot on her father's television talk show. She was furious that Kit and I smoked a joint before going on. But it was Bob Rogers himself who forgot my name when we resumed after the commercial break. We used the top floor of Bob Gould's Third World Bookshop in Goulburn Street to show the movie along with Phil Noyce's documentary about the Aquarius festival, *Good Afternoon*. In 1972, there was nowhere to

screen Australian movies because of exhibitor monopolies and licensing harassments, and there were hardly any Australian films to screen anyway. We hadn't submitted Kit's film to the censor nor did we have a licence for the improvised movie theatre. Ultimately some authority or other closed the theatre down. But for a while it operated, variously called the Red Star Film or East or West or the Sydney Film Maker's Cinema.

One evening amongst the anti-war people and the film-makers and the radicals and the voyeurs and the dope-smokers and the libertarians and the bohemians and the desperadoes and Bob Gould and so on who hung out at the cinema and bookshop, a colleague from the English department, Thelma Herring, came to see the movies. I hadn't expected anyone from the department and of all people I would never have expected to see Thelma at that gathering, for that programme. She appeared to be the archetypal, elderly, unmarried academic of her generation, Lady Margaret Hall style. Indeed she had been offered a fellowship at LMH, but was unable to take it up, having to return to Sydney to nurse her sick mother. But that archetype anyway, and Thelma in particular, was much more complex, much more alive, curious, and open than later generations ever suspected. There she was, and she struggled up the three flights of steep, narrow, rickety stairs to the fire-trap above with its hard chairs, its draughts, its peeling walls patched up with posters. At least the projectionist remembered to turn up that night. But my amazement merely marked my ignorance. For Thelma had a living, genuine, active enthusiasm for a whole range of the arts; this was but a part of it. I was amazed, I was moved, at her interest in what we were doing. That sort of active interest is a rare encouragement. I was grateful for it, and grateful in her continuing interest in what I was writing. She made a point of asking to see *Tabloid Story* when we began that experiment, she read *Living Together* and liked it and identified some possible character originals. She was less enthusiastic about *The Short Story Embassy*. She was not someone who offered merely polite approvals.

One time she arranged a dinner party in a Surry Hills restaurant for Patrick White and Manoly. My English department colleague, the poet Vivian Smith and his wife Sybille and I were the other guests. At that time White was the legendary recluse, who in particular avoided academics and writers. I did once know a painter who knew him. None of the people I knew who wrote, though, had ever met him; but the people I knew who were writing at that time were mainly published in heaven. It was before his involvement in the Centennial Park development protests, well before the 1975 coup and the ensuing protest meetings about that. It was also before his Nobel prize, but the prize only confirmed the prestige and significance White had had for years anyway. So to meet this great figure was something amazing. *Voss* was one of those not very many books that had brought tears to my eyes – Marcus Clarke, Henry James, Jack Kerouac, not many others had done that. But they were all dead.

Again, it was one of those generous things that Thelma did. It came from her love of living literature. And it was a brilliant evening. White reminisced (about when Centennial Park was sand dunes), talked about his writing ('I don't read other fiction when I'm working on a novel'), enthused about his reading ('I think Hesse would mean a lot more to me than Mann now') and gossiped.

In her memoir *Losing Alexandria*, Victoria Thompson recalls that Patrick White 'was titillated by a film in which I had the leading role during the seventies. It was called *The Phallic Forest.* It was really a "tits and bums" film like many of that period of the sexual revolution, except that the writer was the very talented Michael Wilding. Patrick would often make some remark about it which I never knew how to take. I thought in my insecure way that he was being critical, so it was a pleasant surprise one day to receive a post card from New York where Patrick was on a visit. It was a Rousseau painting depicting a naked girl with long, flowing hair in a tropical forest. There was something erotic and wanton about the figure reclining in the lush vegetation. He wrote that when he saw it, he was reminded of the film and simply had to buy it.'

The only other time I met White was at a dinner party given by my English Department colleague Catherine Runcie, who was a neighbour of White's in Martin Road. This was at the time that White had emerged from his lofty pinnacle. Patrician disdain for socialist activity had been superseded by a keen involvement in the opposition to the development of Centennial Park. Jack Munday, the militant leader of the Builders Laborers Federation, was the other guest. They needed him to get the BLF on side against the development, which they did. I was there to give some left wing credibility, I assumed. It was the weekend of a major strike by the electricity workers. The power kept going off, and made the dinner fraught. But no denunciations of the strike could be made when they were trying to enlist Mundey to declare a boycott and preserve their environment and property values.

When I was appointed to a lectureship at the University of Sydney in 1963, my acquaintance with Australian literature was minimal. I had read a Rolf Boldrewood novel, picked up in a second hand bookshop. I had probably read Paul Brickhill. But that was about it. This was no impediment to my career. Although Gerry Wilkes was professor of Australian Literature, there were no courses in the subject on the syllabus. A novel of Patrick White's and Kenneth Slessor's poems were fitted in somewhere, but that was all.

Most of the early critical commentary on Australian writing was the work of amateurs, enthusiasts, non-professionals. They may have been professionals in some other sphere, but Australian literature for many years had no institutional base. The editions, the bibliographies, the critical assessments were written by journalists, clergymen, printers, and writers. Sometimes newspaper columns and radio programmes provided a forum, sometimes adult education courses and extension lectures. The universities and schools offered little.

The study of Australian Literature had not yet been colonized by the university. But the process was underway. Increasingly the critical studies were being written by academics, though most of those academics were primarily, if not totally, teaching English and American literature. Their commentary on Australian literature was a matter of enthusiasm, not part of a professional career. It was a while before research interests led into curriculum changes. In part it was the received wisdom of the years up to the 1960s that there was no validity in offering university courses in modern, let

alone contemporary writing, and Australian literature was essentially part of the modern age. Students did not need to be taught to appreciate and understand the writing of their own time.

But gradually the subject became professionalized. *Southerly*, founded in Sydney by Guy Howarth in 1939, had consistently published critical appraisals of Australian writing. But Howarth went to South Africa and Kenneth Slessor was appointed editor. In terms of getting the magazine out on time, he was not a success, and for a while it looked as if *Southerly* would fail. *Quadrant,* edited by James McAuley and sponsored by the CIA backed Congress for Cultural Freedom, vigorously attempted to rescue Australian writing from the radical nationalists, socialists, communists and other left-wing critics who had been offering some challenging assessments in *Meanjin, Realist Writer,* and *Overland* amongst other publications. The imminent collapse of *Southerly* may have encouraged McAuley in establishing his next project: the establishment of a professional, academic journal, *Australian Literary Studies.* Established under McAuley's aegis and edited by Laurie Hergenhan at the University of Tasmania, it established itself as the first fully professional, scholarly journal of Australian literature in 1963.

I remember buying the first issue. The campus bookshop in those days stocked such items as a new scholarly journal. These were the heady days of the magazines – the literary quarterlies and the journals of opinion. In those days, when literary critics endeavoured to write in ordinary English and to be intelligible beyond a specialized coterie, a journal like *ALS* could hope to reach a wide audience. It needed to, since few people were professionally involved in teaching the subject. It was an elegant, beautifully designed first issue – a classic, restrained, yet inviting look. Simple design. Contents on the cover. This was also the style of the non-academic literary journals, like *London Magazine* and journals like *Southerly* which published both the scholarly articles and new fiction and poetry.

Maybe it was Leonie Kramer's article on the literary reputation of Adam Lindsay Gordon that made me buy it. For I had been secretary of the Adam Lindsay Gordon Society at school. Our most famous Old Boy. A plaque on the school hall preserved his memory: Adam Lindsay Gordon – National Poet of Australia. But in Australia his reputation had faded. For Leonie Kramer to write such an article and for Laurie Hergenhan to publish it went against the developing nationalist trend. Laurie's virtue as an editor was an openness, an eclecticism. His vision was to expand the boundaries of Australian literature, rather than reduce them. He was not afraid to publish on Adam Lindsay Gordon and Marcus Clarke, who had suffered for their English origins and immigrant status at the hands of the cultural nationalists of both the right and the left. He published me on D. H. Lawrence's Australian work - another *bête noir* of the nationalists who had too often been provoked by visiting English academics claiming that *Kangaroo* was the only Australian novel.

ALS was definitely a scholarly journal; it did not publish original poetry or fiction. But it did extend the boundaries of the strictly scholarly journals by publishing interviews. *Southerly* had published transcripts of some of John Thompson's radio interviews with poets. *Paris Review* ran regular interview features. But they were literary journals. Interviews were not part of the agenda of

the traditional scholarly journal. Indeed literary critical orthodoxy of the time – whether Leavisite or New Critical - was to eschew the biographical. 'Never trust the teller, trust the tale,' D. H. Lawrence remarked: and so critics strapped one arm behind their backs (as I think William Empson put it) and shut their eyes to the author, eschewing the evils of the Intentional Fallacy. But Laurie had no such inhibitions. He was, anyway, interested in authorial intentions and the biographical. And so he extended the vision of a scholarly journal from the critical and bibliographical and published interviews. He put me on his advisory board and I put him onto the transcript of an early radio interview with Christina Stead by Ann Whitehead which I'd read when I examined her M. A. thesis. I also got him Stephen Knight's interview with the crime writer Carter Brown and this marked another extension of the scholarly boundaries. Serious discussion of genre fiction, like crime or science fiction, was not a feature of scholarly journals in those days. There was a marked gulf between the literary and the commercial, popular fiction. But Laurie was open to the moves to extend the traditional concerns of literary criticism and he readily extended the conception of what was acceptable beyond the literary into genre work. And, after Nigel Roberts and I had remorselessly lobbied him one evening, he did a groundbreaking issue on the contemporary new writing of the 1970s, providing a serious representation of the emerging novelists and poets well in advance of their general recognition elsewhere. Another time I participated in a radio discussion Jan Garrett chaired with Leonie Kramer and Les Murray and me. Leonie told me that holding the views on literature and the university that I proclaimed, I shouldn't be in the university. I was a bit shaken, but she didn't press the point and I gave her a lift back from the studio, nonetheless. Laurie offered to publish a transcript of the programme in *Australian Literary Studies*, but Les wouldn't sign a release.

Laurie was open to the contemporary, and took every opportunity to participate in it. He was not one of those critics bound to the desk or library. He did not recoil from contact with living writers. On the contrary, he happily participated in the literary world, enjoying an afternoon or evening, or both, in the pub or in a restaurant, always ready to go on to the party afterwards. Once he came round with Xavier Herbert, who talked non-stop all afternoon. At times Laurie seemed like some super secret agent, deep behind enemy lines, carefully observing the shifts and changes of literary politics, collecting data for the increasingly comprehensive annual bibliography of Australian literature which was so important a feature of *ALS*. All too often I would awake after a long session at pub or party with Laurie and an ensuing night of nausea of Barry McKenzie dimensions, to find him as fresh and unaffected and genial as ever, blinking in the morning sun like some Antipodean George Smiley. I would wonder if he had slipped me a Mickey Finn or a truth drug in the cause and course of his researches, how else was I so wasted and he so unaffected? Maybe he was just more moderate than the rest of us. Maybe he was made of sterner stuff.

Certainly Laurie had great skills that might have befitted an undercover agent. He was a master provocateur. He got things done. He got people to do them. Beneath his deceptively beguiling manner, his genial gaze at the weird ways of the world around him, Laurie was immensely adept at

getting people on board some band wagon he was directing, and getting them to push. Those who have worked with him will know what I mean. But we all accepted it and forgave him because the tasks he imposed were not for his personal aggrandisement but for the advancement of Australian literature. As well as *ALS*, he initiated with University of Queensland Press an extensive series of basic texts in Australian literature, called the Portables until the title had to be dropped to satisfy the susceptibilities of the American publisher who originally used the term. Laurie was tireless and remorseless in getting things done and in keeping things going. Central to his own researches was his enthusiasm for Marcus Clarke. I was soon conscripted to this project and signed up to edit a selection of Clarke's writing for the first of the Portables.

Some time in 1972 or 1973 I rented a house in Wharf Road, Balmain. Or Birchgrove, as it was called, once the rather classier end of Balmain, and eventually to become so again. When I was there it was still dilapidated. The old sea captains' houses had been divided up into rooming houses. Across the road on the waterfront Nigel Roberts and assorted New Zealand poets lived, together with Anne Summers, writing her feminist study *Damned Whores and God's Policemen* and Des Ball, writing on Defence issues, Pine Gap and such like. When Jon Silkin was writer in residence at the university, I arranged for him and his wife Lorna Tracy to stay there. He wrote a poem, 'Snail's Bay', about that reach of the harbour. Brian and Suzanne Kiernan moved in round the corner, in Grove Street. Murray Bail lived for a while round another corner, and I would visit him occasionally. He used to enthuse about Raymond Queneau. *Zazie dans le Metro*. At some point he decided he needed somewhere else in which to write. His progress on whatever he was writing was slow, he told me. My *Diary of a Snail* he called it. He took a room in the sculptor Robert Klippel's house on the waterfront, just down the road from me. Paddy McGuinness and Brigitte later moved into a modern apartment on the site of a demolished mansion beside it. There was generally objection and opposition to new developments like that, which no doubt satisfied Paddy's contrariness. 'Why are you so hostile to universities?' I asked him one time in the Forest Lodge. 'Is it because you could never get a job at one?' He gave me an impassioned and comprehensive list of university positions he had held, temporary ones, I assumed, in London, Manchester and the Sorbonne, and we kept clear of each other for the next couple of decades. Paddy dressed all in black. Sunglasses included. He told me it got him better service in bars, to be taken for an Irish Catholic priest. Margaret Throsby lived opposite me in a waterfront and her yapping dog woke me morning after morning. I threatened to spray paint if if she didn't keep it quiet. I never carried out the threat, nor did she ever put me on her radio programme. Susan Varga, who wrote a memoir of the Push, bought a rather elegant house along the road, one of the first Push members to buy property, a mark against her, of course. And further along still, towards the Caltex petrol storage depot, Rae Francis had a waterfront house, and Carl Harrison-Ford lived for a while in a shed, immured within shelves of his books. Next door to me was another old mansion that had been turned into a rooming house for broken down old men. Like much of the property

around there, it was reputedly owned by Mr Big, Lennie Macpherson, the notorious criminal said to be the gangland chief of Balmain, and later revealed to have been a long time police informer. Adrian Heber, a regular at the pub, moved in there for a while and complained to me about the noise of my parties and visitors, which I thought was rather rich, given his own achievements in noisy disruptions. He applied one time for a job as a psychiatrist at Royal North Shore hospital, completely unqualified except experientially. 'They can't do anything if they find out,' he said, 'I'm on a mad pension.' He did get a job as a child minder at a psychiatrists' picnic. 'If the children cause me any trouble,' he said, 'I just duck then in the water and hold them under till they give up.' For a while he was a bosom crony of Moorhouse's and they would play with their guns in Frank's back yard and practice target shooting. Those were the days when Frank's idea of a jolly wheeze was to walk on the roof of some acquaintance's car, leaving great dents and distortions.

I lived across the road from the water, with a splendid view across to the north shore. I would sit in the window, or out on the steps at night, have a smoke or three and look at the freighters moored there, unloading timber onto barges or directly into the harbour. At night prawn trawlers would travel up and down, their lights reflecting in the water. It was still a working reach of the harbour, still with boatyards, always activity, always changing. This was before the new gentrifying residents complained about the noise, and got the industry all moved away. A stray cat adopted me. I called him Marcus, after Marcus Clarke on whose work I was writing a monograph. But the landlord knew him as Harold. And the little boys next door called him something else again.

Nigel Roberts used to do his rounds, dropping in on a Saturday morning for half an hour, picking up and disseminating the gossip, and moving on. Don'o Kim would call in during the week, disturbing my morning's writing, looking for someone to go to the pub with, and I would hide on the floor beneath the windows till he gave up and went and I could get back to work. Except on the days I too felt like going out for a drink. Matt Peacock would call in at night, fresh from his latest discoveries about the lethal effects of asbestos, the dying workers, the refusal of the James Hardie company to acknowledge responsibility. It was due to him that the issues became known and that slowly and belatedly the case came to the courts and slowly, slowly, slowly compensation was paid to the victims. His book *Killer Company* records the decades of struggle to get justice.

It was here that I lived when we started *Tabloid Story*, here where we pasted up the first Wild & Woolley books on great sheets of paper on the floor, sixteen page sections, here where I wrote *Scenic Drive* and *Pacific Highway* and *Political Fictions.* And writing *The Paraguayan Experiment* here, I discovered that William Lane, before setting off for Paraguay, housed the members of the New Australia movement in Balmain, in Nicholson Street, where the *Royal Tar* on which they were to sail was being fitted out at the Jubilee dock, and in neighbouring Rozelle, in terraces opposite the Callan Park mental hospital, where the Writers' Centre is now situated.

One time Nigel brought Shelton Lea round. An adopted son of a family connected with the Darrell Lea chocolate business, Shelton was an inspired poet and a constant source of disruption. On this

occasion he had been arrested for something or other and I had been asked to contribute some bail money. I don't think I ever got it back, but Shelton came round to thank me, embraced me in a tobacco-breathed, alcohol-fumed bear hug, cigarette in hand, burning a hole in the fabric of the new suit I had just bought in which to attend Literature Board meetings.

Yes, for a while I was on the Literature Board of the Australia Council. It was dreadful. If I wanted to go to tedious meetings at which I failed to get anything I believed in approved, there were always English Department staff meetings. I didn't need the Literature Board to be the token radical, the outvoted opposition. I was achieving very little, watching bad decisions being made and being implicated in them. In the end I resigned at one Adelaide Festival. Michael Costigan the director was out of the room at the time. I met him coming back in as I was storming out. So he never knew what had prompted my departure. It didn't matter. It was all of it.

Colin Talbot used to visit from Melbourne, where he had come up with the idea for the alternative paper *The Digger*, but been ousted from the editorial collective, brought back, and ousted again. Then at the same time as I established Wild & Woolley with Pat Woolley, Colin came up with the idea for Outback Press. I valued his take on the world. 'It's unfair,' he reflected on the hustlers who were squeezing us out of the creative worlds we had been inhabiting. 'They're just so ambitious,' he said, 'they make it impossible for anybody else.' He expressed concern at my daily rituals. 'I don't think you should play Leonard Cohen first thing every morning,' he said, staying with me one time. 'It makes you depressed.' Colin was not only *The Australian's* rock 'n' roll correspondent, but an expert in depression. And a brilliant writer. *Sweethearts* is one of the great forgotten masterpieces of Australian fiction.

It was one of Colin's dodgy friends who came round with a girl from Melbourne who needed somewhere to stay. I put her up for the night, maybe two. I can't remember her name, though I read it on the front page of the evening paper a week or so later, one of the ten most wanted criminals in Australia, involved in a heist of artworks in Melbourne. The girl's friends needless to say were dealers. One had served time in gaol in France, where he had learned bookbinding in rehabilitation. He speculated on importing hashish from India, disguised as leather bound books, but it didn't seem like a good idea. Not even at the time. His mother, he told me, was a tea lady at ASIO, and new recruits were trained in surveillance by trailing him through the Melbourne streets. Everyone seemed to have some dodgy contacts. Nigel came round with a girl who'd never been screwed by two men together, and was apparently keen to find out what the experience might be like. 'She used to be a Commonwealth cop,' Nigel told me, by way of encouragement. Which chilled any enthusiasm I might have had. Then one of Pat's boyfriends offered us a deal on twenty-five machine guns. Wild & Woolley might have been publishing and distributing dope books, indeed it was, but I had no wish to enter the armaments business, so I turned down that offer. Vivian Smith phoned me and asked if I'd like to review for *Quadrant*, of which he was books editor. 'Thanks, but I've made a decision not to do any more reviewing,' I told him. 'And why's that?' he asked. 'I'm trying to concentrate on my

writing,' I explained. 'Ah, I thought there might have been another reason,' he said. Well yes, there was, as he very well knew. *Quadrant* was the journal of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, recently revealed as a CIA front. I'd been quite vociferous in my denunciations of those who wrote for it. I couldn't work out why he bothered to ask me. To hear it from the horse's mouth, I guess.

'I always like to read what you have to say about *Quadrant*,' its editor, Peter Coleman, remarked to me years later.

He no doubt remembered that when he had been editing *The Bulletin*, he had suggested to Charles Higham that on the strength of my book reviews I might like to write some articles. Higham took me in to meet him and Coleman asked what I could write on. I didn't really have a clue, I wasn't really interested in writing journalism, but out of the blue I suggested an investigation into who funded Cultural Freedom. This was some years before its CIA source was exposed, though I remember Stuart Hall telling me at Oxford in 1963 that there was something suspicious about the Congress for Cultural Freedom's English publication *Encounter*. The rumour then was that it was funded by the USA State Department. And I'd just been to a party in Sydney at the left wing magazine *Outlook* where the speculations had been rife. Anyone who thought about it knew there was something suspect about the Congress, except apparently for the *Encounter* editors, Stephen Spender and Frank Kermode, who claimed they never knew.

Well, I hadn't researched the topic, and how was I to know that Peter Coleman, after leaving *The Bulletin*, would become editor of the Congress's journal *Quadrant*, and indeed would later write a book, *The Liberal Conspiracy*, commemorating, indeed celebrating, Cultural Freedom and its CIA backing. But that was some years later.

Anyway, he assured me there was no mystery. I never did write any articles for *The Bulletin* and my reviewing ended not long afterwards. In due course I decided that many more publications than *Quadrant* had probably been funded by one agency or another and I'd been writing for them unawares. And that included the so-called alternative press. In the end I decided that most of the available media had views and backers I was out of sympathy with anyway. In the end I began to doubt the whole concept of a free press. Free society. Free world.

Drugs, sex and spookery. It was a heady brew, and quite a toxic one. By the end of it all a lot of us were going crazy in our different ways. But it gave us something to write about. After the ten good years.

Gradually it began to change. Aliens came up from Melbourne. Peter Carey moved in down the road. He would call round sometimes. I remember his being very pleased with the line 'who wants uranium to spare' in an advertising jingle he wrote, though I could never work out what it actually meant. Like most advertising, not very much, I suspect, as long as it was noticed.

'I'm a star in advertising,' he would say, thumping his fist on the table, 'you're a star in the university, we both want to be stars in literature.'

I demurred. I wasn't sure that was what it was about. The needle bounced on the record player.

‘Don’t do that,’ I said, ‘it’s scratching the record.’

‘You’re not worried about property, are you?’ he asked, scathingly, as only a man of property with a Jensen-Healey parked outside could ask.

Thump, thump.

David Williamson came up and bought a house in Louisa Road.

‘He’s really nice,’ my girlfriend said. ‘He’s really interested in people.’

She used to talk to him walking across the park at Snail’s Bay.

‘Don’t tell him anything,’ I said. ‘He’ll steal our material for his plays. If you’ve got anything to say, say it to me.’

Poaching other people’s preserves was an Australian tradition. The country had been settled by people transported for just that. We Sydney writers had to maintain the game laws on our own patch.

I shall look back on these days as happy times, I remember telling myself, even as the Bohemians and poets moved out and the days became darker. And for a while they were happy. Douglas Grey, who had taught me old and middle English at Oxford, came to stay on his way to New Zealand. Vicki called in when I was out and regaled him with stories of *la vie bohème*, which he found vastly entertaining. He told me that there was an English fellowship coming up at my old college, and he suggested I should apply. He intimated I had a strong chance of being elected. But these were happy times. I was writing, I was editing, I was publishing, I was enjoying the freedoms of the new world. I didn’t see how I could write the sort of thing I was writing in Oxford. So this time I didn’t respond to the call.

The Fiction of Instant Experience

Growing up in the English Midlands and arriving in Australia when I was twenty-one, my early stories recounted both worlds, a sense of provincial restrictions and the notation of English society, and the excitement of Sydney, of the sun, warmth and sensuality.

'We'll show you instant Sydney,' the graduate students said.

I had grown up in a landlocked country town in England. Provincial, puritan and proletarian. Now the excitement of Sydney, the sun, warmth and sensuality, lay all before me, free from those English restrictions of class and propriety and poverty. I began writing about this brave new world. The challenge was not just to write about new experiences, but to find new ways of recording them. To capture that instant accessibility of Sydney as spontaneously and immediately as possible. Society was changing. Britain had yet fully to emerge from the austerity of the post-war years. But Australia had already developed a new hedonism, more at ease with the body, more open about sexuality. The pubs, the push, the beaches and bohemia, libertarians and literati, I fell in love with all of it. These early stories were realist in mode. But working on the principle that new experiences require new forms, I was soon exploring various experimental modes. Much of the early fiction dealt with the world of bohemia, or what for a while was known as the 'alternative.' My first published novel *Living Together* recounted it in traditional narrative terms, my second, *The Short Story Embassy*, in a much more open-ended, fragmented post-modern way.

It was not quite a matter of writing it all down at the very moment that it was happening. I tried that, but it had its obvious limitations, trying to live and write simultaneously. Jack Kerouac had sat on the beach at Big Sur 'sketching' as he called it, writing down his impressions as they occurred. But once you get up and walk around and interact with people, the impossibility of writing down what is happening the moment it happens becomes all too clear. Indeed, I wrote a story about just that problem, 'The Man of Slow Feeling', which took me into the realms of science-fiction.

So you have to simulate a sense of the immediate. One way was to follow the modernist strategy of spontaneity. Just sit down and write, without any planning, without notes, or story-board, without even knowing what you are going to write about until you begin. It was an attempt to capture the improvisations of jazz.

And so with *The Short Story Embassy, Scenic Drive and Pacific Highway* I explored spontaneity, writing without any detailed plan or preliminary notes. I wanted to capture the freshness of immediate inspiration, the unrepressed utterance. Just sat down and wrote each morning. A pot of

tea, a smoke, and off I went. Later I shaped, edited and reordered the material. But it wasn't written sequentially. So I would write bits of dialogue, bits of narrative, sometimes full episodes, sometimes fragments I would glue together later into blocks that looked like episodes. When I collected it all together into book form, I put it into a sort of chronological order so it could read like a novel or a narrative. But in fact it doesn't matter which order the stories are read in.

A planned, traditionally structured novel aims for a consistency of tone. But one of the concomitants of spontaneity was shifting tones, adopting different types of narrative on different occasions. Out of this spontaneity came fantasies, alternative versions of an event, speculative versions about what might have happened, what could have happened, what might happen. So the narrative shifts from reportage and actuality into speculation and fantasy, and back again. This creates a complexity in the narrative, a sense of impermanence, transitoriness – a lightness of touch after the firm certainties of classic fiction. It's a device that has now been used in television in *Californication* and *How I Met Your Mother* some thirty something years later.

And of course there was dialogue. With dialogue the reader is there, listening in to the immediate rather than reading a reflection after the event. Dialogue could capture the new idioms, the developing ways of seeing things. It's about as instant as you can get, and in my later fiction, from *Academia Nuts* to *Asian Dawn,* dialogue has been a dominant feature.

There was also the issue of the market. Publishers and booksellers were never that enthusiastic about collections of stories. They preferred novels which were said to sell better. I began to evolve a hybrid mode. *Scenic Drive* and *Pacific Highway* were indeterminately story collections or novels. Each episode was designed to stand alone, and so could be published separately as a story in a magazine or anthology. But the final book was presented as a novel. A useful marketing strategy. Environmentally sensitive re-cycling. I don't see strong generic boundaries between stories and novels.

Gradually my earlier explorations of the new sexual liberation of the 60s, in all its ambiguities and contradictions, were followed by more political explorations, looking at the controls and taboos of contemporary society in *Reading the Signs*, *Under Saturn,* and *This is for You;* conspiracies, drugs and paranoia joined my themes. Sometimes I favoured fables, fantasies and science-fiction modes to explore these issues, sometimes psychological realism, sometimes explorations of voice and idiom.

We tried all sorts of outlets for stories – newspapers and magazines, underground and establishment. We had lots of ideas, like putting stories on breakfast cereal packets, or reading stories on taxi cab radio. Neither happened. One time we decided to beard Peter Carey in his advertising agency and propose the idea of short stories on advertising spots on late night television. 'Why late night?' Frank kept insisting, why not peak time viewing?' Well, we got there, to the agency, at least, but it had been a long, fiction-finding lunch and anyway by then Peter Carey had abandoned stories for jumbo-sized airport novels. We just sat in the armchairs in the lobby and told our stories and they

sent us home. Another time Colin Talbot and I were involved in a scheme to paste up stories on bus stops. Bus-Stop Entertainments. It was a singularly ill-organised venture, but we made the front page of *The Australian*, and the Australia Council's Literature Board wrote and offered us funding. We didn't accept. In those days we were high-minded and only wanted funding for things that we felt were actually going to work, and this we soon found out wasn't. However posters were a medium of the time. The poets had got in there amongst the advertisements for rock concerts and political demonstrations. Jurgis Janavicius was printing a successful series of Poster Poems, and he published my story 'Silence of the Seer'. Then there was mail art, primarily an international network of visual artists who mailed stuff through the post to each other. Nigel Roberts and I put together a duplicated magazine, *Post-Modern Writing* for circulation in that postal network. And there were always the readings, not only in Balmain, but in art galleries, pubs, cafes and on campuses. They could be quite bizarre. Like the Paddington art gallery event in which a young woman rose up to stand beside David Malouf and howl as he read from one of his works. At first we assumed that he had orchestrated it as an *avant garde* performance event, free-form caterwauling. But ultimately we concluded that she was a sensitive soul in aesthetic torment.

And then there were the little magazines, as they are rather disparagingly called. They have been a crucial part of the literary world since the early years of the twentieth century. They provide a forum for new work, for aesthetic developments, for challenging the old and conventional and outworn. And they provide a starting place for new talent. It is through the little magazines and the literary quarterlies that so many of the established, successful writers first began to get into print. They serve a crucial function, that is, in the ongoing development of literature, and in the encouragement and facilitation of new writing. Little magazines, literary quarterlies, reviews, whatever you call this genre of publications, are increasingly alone in making a firm commitment to literature as the independent publishers one by one are absorbed by the big conglomerates, lose their literary lists, and become just another part of the entertainment industry.

Little magazines tend to be associated with a specific group or sub-group of writers, often writers who are not finding it easy to access the mainstream literary world. They would find a wealthy backer and launch a new aesthetic on the world. A hundred years ago wealthy backers for literary projects seem to have been easier to find than now. But it is still possible to start something. I remember the American poet Ted Berrigan explaining how to do it at a conference in London I went to with Vicki Viidikas. I put the advice in my novel, *Wildest Dreams.*

'To be a poet, he explained, you have to write poems and publish them. You find other poets, people you know writing poems, you put your poems together with theirs, type them onto stencils, and you have a magazine, find out other poets whose work you admire, ask them to send poems to your magazine, find out other poets who are editors and you ask them for poems and they ask you, you assemble a network through the mails, sending out these sheafs of poems, little magazines produced on institutional equipment, duplicators, off-set presses, photocopiers, mailed out at institutional expense to

poets at other institutions, a list of publications begins to emerge, the core of a curriculum vitae, poems, poems in magazines, poems gathered in slim samplings, booklets, books, you have sewn yourself into the professional world of poetry, you have the credibility to teach poetry institutionally, you get hired, the first struggle is over, after that conferences, international travel.'

There was a certain careerist opportunism in Berrigan's advice, not to be despised. Much of it we had already followed. Nigel Roberts' *Free Poetry*, for instance, was printed on the duplicator at the school where he taught art. Though such ventures had to struggle against a prevailing conservative conformity. I remember when Phillip Roberts set up Island Press, Moorhouse remarked on this being the self-publishing equivalent of a vanity press; he saw it as a defeat by Phil. That is how mystified things could be.

As well as opportunism I have always felt there was something romantic about little magazines and small presses, too, their encapsulation of a world of literary hope, of youthful aspiration. Again from *Wildest Dreams*, where I recalled my first arrival in Sydney, and the room in Victoria Street, Kings Cross, that Germaine Greer discovered for me:

'The romance of the rooming house. The bed. The chair. The window on the street, deciduous leaves falling, people passing. No night ladies his landlady insisted. Lying on the bed in the early twilight reading *The Red and the Black* in an American paperback edition. He had found the bookshop in the Cross, a deep narrow slot with books ranked up the walls, sometimes stacked on the floor, piled on the central tables, and he would wander up there, look at *London Magazine, Paris Review*, and wonder did he really want to buy them. But *London Magazine, Paris Review* and American paperbacks were the iconography of the hope of literature, of the literary life, not available in the provincial Midlands.'

Soon I discovered Australia's own literary magazines. There were the established quarterlies *Southerly, Meanjin, Overland, Westerly*, and *Quadrant*. There were the two poetry magazines, *Poetry Magazine* and *Poetry Australia*. There were leftist political magazines like *Dissent* and *Comment*. And then from the late nineteen-sixties through the seventies a host of little magazines appeared: Nigel Roberts' *Free Poetry*, Kris Hemensley's *The Ear in a Wheatfield*, Phillip Edmonds and Robert Kenny's *Contempa*, Robert Adamson's *New Poetry* (the revamped *Poetry Magazine*) and *Leatherjacket*, Tom Thompson's *Dodo*, Tom, Damien White and Anna Couani's *Island in the Sun*, Chris Mansell's *Compass*, Elizabeth Perkins' *Linq*, Keith Russell and Brian Musgrove's *Riverrun*, Nigel Krauth's *Imprint*, Richard Allen's *Neos*, Larry Buttrose's *Fling*, Martin Duwell's *Makar*, Rudi Krausmann's *Aspect*, Michael Denholm and Andrew Sant's *The Tasmanian Review* (later *Island*) and Kevin Brophy and Myron Lysenko's *Going Down Swinging*. I was involved editorially with *Balcony* and *Tabloid Story*. And there were many more. Michael Denholm produced a comprehensive bibliography of them. Some were ephemeral, duplicated, stapled: others were quite elegantly designed and well produced. None of them circulated many copies. Some had very brief lives. But it was in these and other little magazines like them that we were publishing our work. Soon we were involved in running small presses – Colin Talbot with Outback, Adamson with Prism Poets, Phil Roberts with Island Press, and

Pat Woolley and I with Wild & Woolley.

We published in the established quarterlies when we could, but their taste tended to be conservative. Once in a while a newspaper or weekly journal would be open to a short story, but not regularly. The little magazines were more open in terms both of form and content. There was always a new magazine cropping up, the editor calling round or turning up at the pub, asking for a contribution. It is nice to be asked. As for payment, or estimated circulation, such things were never mentioned. But they didn't seem important. The American novelist Richard Stern once passed on some advice to me that Saul Bellow, his friend and colleague at the University of Chicago, had given him. Basically it came to this. If someone invites you to contribute a literary piece somewhere, contribute. Don't agonise about trying to get published in places you can't get published in, but take what is offering.

You can waste a lot of energy and time and calm of mind in trying to get into whatever publication is modish at the moment. Well, yes, certainly it is worth trying to publish in the famous magazines and with the famous publishers, though generally by the time they have become famous they have lost the flare that gave them their reputation. But if someone invites you to write for them, don't turn down the invitation on the grounds that I can do better, this piece deserves a better home. It is all too easy to end up homeless that way. It fitted in with Allen Ginsberg's saying that he always responded with a poem to an invitation to publish. This was the mood of the times.

The project we were engaged in was to develop new techniques in order to represent new social patterns, to cut tissue samples in new sections to reveal the new, to develop new ways of taking soundings. This involved developing new formal techniques as well as new media of publication and distribution, new magazines and small presses. Realism may have been our intention in recording the realities of the society we were experiencing. But it was not a matter of just copying it down. Just copying it down is a matter of using unthought, pre-existent forms ready to hand. New forms had to be developed. That search for new ways of expression was something focussed on observed reality, it was never emptily formalist like the work of some of our contemporaries. Nor was it in the traditional realist mode still favoured in those years by *Overland* and *Meanjin.* We had no name for what we did. Why did it need a name? It was simply what you did, observing the world, developing your techniques, pushing the boundaries forward.

At the time we called it the new writing. The term post-modernism was yet to achieve currency. It was a valuable phase. It liberated us from a tired, unadventurous, no longer effective realism. It allowed for disruptions and discontinuities, broke a lot of formal taboos, encouraged the awareness of the nature of literary structures and conventions, helped to exploit allusion and intertextuality and collage, and allowed a richer set of possibilities in all respects. But these formal breakthroughs were ultimately only valuable insofar as they enabled the writer to say something new, to bring a new vision to content. Minimalism and self-referentialism seemed fresh and lively, uncluttered by all the social baggage, until you paused to wonder what you were saying in the end,

after removing all that social baggage. I had to stop and ask, where is this 'pure' writing taking me? It wasn't taking me where I wanted to be.

In those years when we were all post-modernists before the invention of the term, I remember being concerned to write stories without narrative. We had been looking at the achievements of the great modernists, and wondering what else was still to be done. And draining stories – or fictions, as even then they were coming to be called – draining fictions of narrative seemed like a good, and new, idea. I don't think we had any other motive than that of extending the modernist revolution. Along with the removal of figuration, representation and so on, narrative was the next to go. One strategy was to remove dependence on plot and progression and denouement, and to construct a novel from a batch of episodes that related to each other in terms of their characters, setting and concerns, but that at the same time could stand alone. This derived from the way in which they were written – episodes originally created without any defined order or sequence. The sequence, the ordering of the episodes, came after they were all written. Overall, in *Scenic Drive, Pacific Highway* and the later *Wildest Dreams* and *Wild Amazement*, I ended up with a roughly chronological sequence since there seemed no reason not to. But the genesis of these books, their composition, was in a series of variations on a theme rather than a beginning, middle and end plot.

This was a long time ago, before the more dubious implications of this late modernist or proto-post-modernist project had been thought through, before we had put our minds to the dehumanizing and de-politicizing, or at any rate de-radicalizing, agenda. At the time it just seemed another thing to do. I remember Jon Silkin being very dubious about it.

But there was another force directing us, though we had not recognized it, or at least not admitted it. This was the difficulty, indeed it often seemed the impossibility, of constructing a narrative that made sense any more. Our lives, our careers, our aspirations no longer seemed expressible by the traditional narratives. Or maybe we just hoped not. Things didn't seem to be happening in that beginning middle and end way. The grand designs were not fulfilled. We did not want blindly to replicate old plots. But the new ones were not apparent. And this really was the beginning of the post-modern, this was starting point of the contemporary narrative that goes nowhere, that is without hope, without destination, without comprehensibility. To rediscover plot in contemporary life is a problem. We do not, for one thing, have the future perspective from which to look back and see what was happening to us. But if a future standpoint is unattainable, what is available is a sense of history, a narrative perspective on how we have come to this impasse. One of the most worrying aspects of the post-modern, and of current institutional practice in the universities, in particular in departments of history and literature, is the surrender of history; even more than that, the rejection of history, the denial of history. History and literature courses more and more cover only the last few years. The plot to do away with history is part of the plot that will do away with plot. One way, perhaps the only way we can comprehend what is happening to us now, is to be able to compare and contrast it with what has happened at other times; once we allow the sense of history to be

removed, then the possibility of any narrative of our present is vastly reduced.

After disporting around in the sea of self-referentiality, which was fun at the time for a time but which you wouldn't want to spend your life in, I started work on a documentary novel, *The Paraguayan Experiment*. And this involved an exploration in history. Gerry Wilkes had asked me to write the introduction to a reissue, in the Australian Literary Reprints series he edited for Sydney University Press, of *The Workingman's Paradise*, a novel by the nineteenth century socialist William Lane. Lane wrote his novel to raise money for the Queensland unionists gaoled on conspiracy charges after the collapse of the great shearers' strike of 1890. It was a time of massive defeat for the Australian trade union movement. From the end of those hopes came a new beginning. Lane decided to opt out of Australia, set off for Paraguay, and set up a socialist community there, New Australia.

Around the same time I was asked to write the libretto for a music theatre piece about Lane's New Australia movement. The two projects involved months of researching Lane's involvement in the establishment of *The Worker,* in the shearers' strike and in the settlement of Australian trades-unionists, communists and socialists in Paraguay. I completed the introduction and *The Workingman's Paradise* was in due course reissued. I wrote the libretto but the composer was way behind in completing the music. Rather than let my researches go to waste, I decided to make use of the material I had accumulated and write a novel. One of the questions often asked is how writers choose their characters. Sometimes I think you don't. Sometimes I think it is the other way round, the characters choose you. They hang around in the upper ether, waiting for a suitable medium or channel and then hone in on it. I began to suspect this when I realized that the day I finally, after much delay and prevarication, set pen to paper, was actually Lane's birthday.

With *The Paraguyan Experiment* I made a dialectical reversal from the post-modernism in which I had been immersed. The political was uppermost in the Lane material and I returned to a determinedly realist mode, though I retained the modernist device of collage to incorporate documentary material. The New Australia movement was an historical event and masses of contemporary reports, letters, diaries and newspaper commentary survive. Generally the episode is called utopian, with the implication that it was unrealistic, misconceived and bound to fail. The word utopian, even more than narrative, was a victim of the post-modern counter-revolution. But just as I believe in positive endings, so I don't believe utopian ideals are doomed to failure. What a careful study of the historical materials demonstrated was not that the movement was doomed to failure, but that it was monitored and consciously destroyed by the infiltration of secret agents. And in order to demonstrate this, I found that I had to re-establish the narrative. Instead of taking a broad general view of things, instead of adopting the static pre-existent tableau of utopia-doomed-from-the-beginning, I worked through the diaries and reports and letters and pieced together what the sequence of events was, who did what when and who responded in what way.

One document I incorporated at length was a Confidential Memorandum to the British Foreign Office by M. de C. Findlay, preserved in the Public Record Office at Kew. I found it

suggestive that the British Foreign Office was keeping watch on the project. But it was not till thirty years later when reading Andrew Cook's *M. MI5's First Spymaster* that I came across M. de C. Findlay again and my suspicions about his role were confirmed: 'Colonel Davies' Separate Account, the secret Foreign Office fund ... provided one-off sums to diplomats and agents in ports all over the world to facilitate enquiries ... accounts for the spring of 1906 include receipts from Cairo: 'I Manfeldt de Cardonnel Findlay, acknowledge to have received from Sir Edward Grey, Baronet, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, the sum of twenty-five pounds (£25) for the purposes of His Majesty's Foreign Secret Service, and I do hereby solemnly declare that the said sum has been disbursed faithfully and according to my best judgement for those purposes ...'

The documents relating to New Australia were voluminous. "You know where William Lane's brother's papers are, don't you' said Walter Stone, the printer and publisher and bibliographer. He was one of those amateurs who had sustained the study and recording of Australian Literature for years, and a fund of information.

'No,' I said.

'In Fisher Library.'

On hand at Sydney University.

Others were preserved in the Mitchell Library of the State Library of New South Wales. In the course of my researches half of the Mitchell papers were lost. One day I was reading them, the next time I ordered them up they were missing. They remained missing for three years. By then I had finished the book. In the paranoid mode of the times, I wondered if the loss of the materials might have been on-going political sabotage. Maybe not, maybe just one of the routine hazards of research. It proved to be a blessing, saving me from getting utterly immersed and bogged down in source materials. I was overwhelmed with materials, the participants in the experiment had left copious letters, records, published and unpublished accounts. I was drowning in data. I dreaded discovering any more materials. I was moving more and more slowly, the project was taking far longer than I had anticipated, I was experiencing immense difficulty in bringing it to a closure. The loss of half of the library's materials saved me. I had already been through them, now I was prevented from over-dependence on them, from unnecessary transcription, from the reduplication of evidence and an excess of documentation.

Out of laborious documentary researches a narrative emerged, and the narrative told a story. Spontaneity was superseded by research, the incorporation of historical data and documents, and the renewal of a narrative line; only by finding out what happened when could I find out why things happened. And so I re-engaged with narrative, re-engaged with society. I don't want at all to minimize the formal and aesthetic aspects of writing; but these emerge from an engagement with subject matter. I came out of post-modernism with a new interest in the story, in narrative, and with a renewed concern to engage with content, with the world around me, with the political. And this also changed my approach to literary criticism. With *Political Fictions* I had been concerned to elucidate political

ideas in my reading of novels. Now I realized that a full understanding of the politics required a detailed exploration of the historical context and documentary evidence. This was the procedure I was to to follow in the work that issued in *Dragons Teeth: Literature and Politics in the English Revolution* and in *Studies in Classic Australian Fiction*.

It was a procedure out of phase with the way the world was becoming. The publishing climate was changing, the universities were under siege and redefining themselves. A counter-revolution was under way to wipe away the gains of the previous three decades. The not terribly good times had begun.

How to Leave Your Daughter Out of Your Stories; or, The Badfather

It was back in the Balmain days, in all, or some, of their frightful ambiguity. The bright sun bouncing off the harbour and glaring into the hung-over mornings, the typewriter waiting there, waiting, waiting. The phone rang. Was I huddled beneath the sheets trying to keep out the light, or hunched at the typewriter trying to exclude the barking dogs, neighbours, life, reality? One or the other. I answered it and there was something of a silence.

'Hello,' I no doubt snapped again

'It's Sunny,' Sunny said. 'Can you come and take me to kindy. Mummy's too drunk.'

How could I not be charmed? I was. Charmed indeed. How long had I known her mother, not long, how had she discovered my number, how did she know how to phone, aged all of three?

Mummy was sound asleep. But saying she was drunk had been an effective way of getting me over there. So I took Sunny to kindergarten. What was a morning's writing, anyway? Now it provides an evening's writing, years on.

I explained my doubts to Pat Woolley, my partner in our publishing company. 'The problem is,' I said, 'there's a child.'

'So?'

'Well, I don't know, it just makes it more difficult.'

'Why?'

'Well, travelling.'

'Take the kid with you, what's difficult about that?'

'Well ...,'

'Hire a car, what's the difference?'

The previous week it had been 'Charter an airplane' to entertain some visiting publisher. I refused. But there is a limit to how much you can refuse.

'Just treat it like a ready-made family,' said Pat. 'Saves all the hassle of making one, it just comes as part of the package.'

She was quite good on things like that, package deals, bulk-buy bargains, it was the American practical streak I'd lacked. It was an insight of genius. We incorporated Sunny into the press. She rubber-stamped our address on the backs of the packets of books we mailed out to the booksellers. Those were the good days, when the booksellers were ordering books.

So there I was with a family. Most of the writers I knew didn't have families. Bachelor Writing was the term the French critics used.

‘My books are my children,’ Christina Stead told me, ‘and I’m a bad mother, I just send them off into the world and let them fend for themselves.’

Maybe one of the origins of writing lies in the failure of the family, the escape from the family, the compensating fantasy life. I’d certainly never thought in terms of a family. The fears of death that had haunted my youth had led to their Kerouacian notion that to create a life was to doom it to death. It didn’t seem to matter in the same way with books.

There we are again, books. Always the displacement, the evasion. It is easier to write about books than a daughter, about literature than life. Maybe some literary anecdotes will ease me into it. The time at Bob Adamson’s when Robert Creeley was visiting.

‘Why have you only got one eye?’ Sunny asked.

Or a reading at some gallery in Sydney where Les Murray was looming.

‘Why are you so fat?’

The questions we never ask. And sometimes the answers; like the time Moorhouse came round to quiz me on my contacts before going on a Foreign Affairs trip to India.

‘He’s mad.’

These were the treasured observations.

I had decided I couldn’t write this piece and had just regretfully written to Carmel Bird declining the invitation to contribute to her *Daughters and Fathers* collection, no time, too difficult, too busy etc., when Sunny read my stories in *This is For You*. All the settings were familiar, North Africa, California, Greece, Sydney. She remembered the incidents. And found herself erased from all of them. She inquired of her mother why this might be.

Maybe I should have asked her, did she want to be present or absent. I had taken the unilateral decision based on the agonies of writers’ children I had known or been told of, who had been fixed in cute caricature for ever in their parents’ pages and hated it. Not just Christopher Robin but ones nearer to home. Yet was erasure any less painful than travesty, absence than caricature, exclusion than condescension? Seemingly not.

‘They ate the majouna which was sweet like a spiced fudge.

‘“If you want to get higher,” the law student had said, “just eat more.”

‘“To make it work better,” Mustapha had said, “drink some hot tea.”

‘So they drank mint tea and walked across the road from the hotel to the beach.

‘“Chocolat, hashish?”

‘“No thank you,” they said.

‘They walked across the sand to the sea, watching the sand shimmering, the sea resonating. A string of three camels loped across to them.

‘“You want to ride? You have a ride?”

‘But they declined.’

Well, they declined, Marcus and Lydia as they were called in the story 'Kayf', but Sunny determinedly accepted. It was horrendous, looking back. Even now, years later, I can remember lying on the sand, the cool wind making it slightly uncomfortable, and these huge animals, towering above us. One of them knelt. Sunny climbed on, that delighted grin I was glad to see again the other night, grinning down at us. The camel driver whacked the camel with a stick, and it rose. It is very easy to say it rose, but to see a camel rise, its back legs first, then kneeling on its front legs, then rising, this, when you are totally out of your head on majouna, all in the cause of literary research I add, then it is another experience.

'It seemed very high up on the camel's hump,' the story continues. I remember the difficulty in writing this. I remember the difficulty because Lydia and Marcus were firmly on the gritty sand. But the deeply empathetic effects of majouna, of the hashish-based paste with who knows what other potentiating spices added, made Sunny's experience almost theirs, ours. Every sway, every surge of the camel passed through our systems. We lived the metaphor of the ship of the desert. It was like being storm tossed, sea sick.

Then we had to fight off the camel driver's importunity. 'Now you.'

'No, thank you.'

Repeated endlessly, endlessly, endlessly.

We lay there in the out-of-season wind while the camels described a wide circle round the beach.

I should've done it, I told myself. If I was a writer, why did I shy from experience? If I was a writer, shouldn't I welcome the chance to ride a camel? Even if stoned. Incapacitatedly stoned. And what if I fell off? The writer's self-preoccupied thoughts. To the mother it was all terror, empathizing with her daughter's precarious perch, surges of stoned terror, fears for her safety, endless angst, until the camels returned.

And then the next episode.

'They spent a lot of time lying on the bed because they got the usual stomach bug. But though their bowels turned to water, they survived on mint tea and kif and hashish.'

Yes, she is excluded here again. And indeed if she had not been with us, would we have ever survived? We were well stocked up on kif and hashish. Even had some of the majouna left. But we were in no state to go down and get the mint tea. She kept us alive, running errands backwards and forwards as we groaned and vomited and excreted for the next three or four days. So indeed it is unpardonable to have left her out.

But it did seem that she might not have appreciated being included. Is this the family snapshot you would care to show your friends, boyfriends' parents, in-laws, prospective employers? Here are mummy and daddy completely off their brains, stoned beyond redemption, yes, that's why they went to North Africa, with their eleven-year-old daughter in tow.

It was hard enough getting this sort of thing into print as it was. I could produce the readers' reports, if I hadn't burned them in disgust. 'One long pursuit of sex and drugs.' Etc. With a child accompanying, what respectable journal let alone publisher would care to print it? What welfare agency wouldn't seize on it with relish? Now it is all long past. Even now I am not convinced that it can be told. But challenged on the erasures, this is my attempt to restore something of the absent.

Well we went to North Africa because I had had a fight with my own parents. Fathers and sons. These are the sorts of things I leave out because they are too painful. Now my parents are dead I guess it can't hurt them. But I still have no inclination to go into the felt detail. And without the felt detail, can it be the stuff of fiction? But we upped and left my parents, got the train down to London, found the library where Sunny's mother was working, peered through the window at her and waved, two cold waifs in the November streets. A double-decker bus went by. Along the side it asked, WHY NOT GO TO MOROCCO? Why not indeed? Away from the wretched grey skies of England, to where I could research my on-going study of Hashish and the Literary Imagination. What was that stuff, *dawamesc*, *majouna*, that Gautier and Baudelaire and de Nerval and Dumas all tried?

The early days were easy, the days before the world turned dark. Those were the days of sun and sea, when we used to go up north to see Sunny's grandfather, and spend long days on the beach at Broken Head, before global warming and cancer warnings had made a day on the beach a thing of terror. We would sit on the sand and I would teach her how to write, marking out words with a stick. This episode I did include in a book, *Pacific Highway*.

'MOUSE

'HOUSE

'WISH

'FISH

'DISH

'KANGAROO

'The long words do not fit into the program. But without them the program does not work. Who wants to be confined to monosyllables? She loves that leap into multiplicity.

'POLYSYLLABLISM.'

Of course it had to be teaching words. Her mother and grandfather taught her to swim. But the writer has to ensure literacy. The future readership.

That was the time she emerged one night saying she couldn't sleep.

'Why not?'

'I'm embarrassed.

'Embarrassed?' we said. 'Why are you embarrassed?'

‘I don’t know.’

She was embarrassed, we were puzzled.

‘What does embarrassed mean?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know, I just said it so you would talk to me.’

That bit of the writer’s trade she must have picked up from observation, that is a mystery we do not instruct others in.

And then back to the beach, the long lyrical days, in and out of the water, punctuated by magic mushrooms. We would sit on the beach, her mother and I, and wait for the mushrooms to take effect, the warm metallic glow rising up and clustering round you warm and golden and a certain sound quality, a hum like a cicada envelops you and you are glowing in vibration with the mushroom. It is all a long time ago and I have to transcribe my own written text to remember it. Images of peacock feathers and minarets, onion domes and fairgrounds, the lines of the air currents along which the birds flew, sentiments of cosmic unity. And then from behind a rock Sunny would pop up, like some irreducible grinning earth force, the Cheshire cat smile over the boulder, watching our strange abstraction.

‘Go and play, go and swim, go and build sandcastles,’ we would instruct, and the head would disappear, only to re-emerge around another rock, like one of the trolls or gnomes or earth spirits her mother claimed she could see in the cliff.

And then the bad years began. Bad for me, which by the externalization of my despair meant they were bad for everybody close to me. These were the years of the political repression, the roll-back of the sixties and seventies, the years of black-listing and purging and harassment and destabilizing. The break-ins where they went through the filing cabinet and left cash in the drawers. The mail arriving already endlessly carelessly opened. The endless phone calls with no one speaking when you answered. The literary friend who wanted to borrow your address book. The literary friend who stayed over drunk and who you found in the middle of the night reading through your files.

This was when we were still living in separate houses, and one night her mother said she was wakened by a man standing in the room, holding a rope or chloroform pad or something. She screamed.

‘Get out,’ she screamed.

‘Don’t worry,’ said the man, in chilling officialese, ‘this is just routine to me.’

He left, and she gathered up Sunny and they came hurtling round to my house, and sat on the doorstep shivering until dawn broke and they had calmed themselves down enough to wake me up.

There could have been innocent explanations for all these things. Or some of them. But once you have set off on the track of suspicion, it begins to consume you. The incidents themselves are less important than the general ambience, the climate of fear, the mood of desperation. And it was this

mood of desperation I exuded for those bad years. If you move outside the accepted agenda these are the consequences. To recognize them doesn't mean you accept them, and I certainly came to recognize them. At least didn't have all my ribs broken by police, like Jonah my radical friend in New York. Or my dogs poisoned, like Pira. Or spend seven years black-listed, unemployed, like Gustav. But it was what was done to Sunny and her mother that was unforgivable. I had made a choice, the writer always makes a choice. But it is the partner and children who pay for it.

It created a climate of mistrust. You became wary of who you let in the house, who you visited. Well, not many people at all. And this was the context when the first boyfriends appeared. And why was this boyfriend so eager to meet the family, so demanding to meet me? I remembered my own adolescence, the last thing I wanted to do was meet a girlfriend's father. Was this a new generation, keen on family bonding? I retreated into caricatured distance, grumpy, taciturn withdrawal. How can you say to your daughter, I think your boyfriend is a fledgling spook, and I refuse to deal with him?

When you spend your life lecturing people, you do not want to lecture your daughter. Or at least I didn't. I'm not sure I ever wanted to lecture anybody, anyway, but on the principle of, if you want to be a writer, get a real job, I did. But at home diffidence returned. Or at least in my mind it did. She may well see it differently. But it's not in lecturing you communicate a world view best. She had ears like hawks. Or like hawks' eyes. She seemed to hear everything. And so those endless evening monologues, as I talked through the way things were, or seemed to be, as best I could make them out to be, I guess she heard all of it. It was repetitive enough not to need to hear all of it anyway. This was the eighties when the counterrevolution was firmly in place, when everyone you knew on the left was sick or listless, marginalized or out of circulation, except those who had mutated into theory or managerialism or some other form of sycophantic betrayal. But those who believed were disappearing, and we talked at night about how this was being done, how doors were being shut, media purged, publishers' lists changing, as the new world order took over. Illustrated with case studies of individual collaborators, informers, turncoats, provocateurs, agents, all named, all endlessly analyzed. What else did we have to talk about but the dismantling of our world, the destruction of hope? These were the preoccupying things that cast the pall over the house. The things that could not be talked about that we talked about endlessly at night, that sidled out the kitchen door and round the corner into her room.

Nor was it as abstract as that. This was a climate of suspicion and no one could be exempt. So this visitor or that acquaintance the parents of this school friend or that, how exactly did they make a living, why were they off to Canberra, Washington, what exactly were their links with the military, the intelligence community, right-wing think tanks, the dope trade, on, on, on it went, it had to go, it would be madness not to follow the suspicions, and madness to do so.

It must have been like the childhood of those children brought up to left-wing parents in the blacklisting fifties, except in the fifties there was still a body of resistance, a network of opposition. Even that had gone now. It was no climate in which to bring up anyone.

What about all the happy times, the long summers in Greece, where Sunny and her mother would leave the house early in the morning so I could write my sagas of suspicion and paranoia in silence, while they went down to the beach and swam and played chess, long cicada-laden days, when old ladies with donkeys would stop them on the track and offer them pears and peaches, where fishermen would offer them lifts in the back of their trucks amongst the nets and fish boxes, where Pan would play softly through the reeds on the lower track, and the eagles circle high above the top road. And then I would struggle out in the noonday sun and walk the hour-long walk to the beach, and we would eat and drink at the *taverna*, and in the afternoon the grandmother from the *taverna* would conscript Sunny into drying figs, opening them out, laying them in a tray, ready to dry in the sun.

And at night, more lessons. There was a wood-burning range, and we would go out round the baked dry garden looking for twigs to start a fire. We could collect just enough scraps to boil the water for spaghetti, and make a basic sauce. This is when she first learned to cook and developed a taste for spaghetti. And then we would walk down to the spring in the cool of evening and collect the drinking water.

Or in the long summer evenings in England, put to work in the garden by my mother, endlessly picking raspberries and strawberries, the burden of harvest, the rapidly ripening fruit that had to be picked or it would go to waste, and then bottled or frozen. Here, share some of my childhood tortures. The pleasures you look back on that were a torment at the time.

Or the Bangladeshi *balti* restaurant in Birmingham, where you ate with your fingers, had to eat with your fingers. She loved that, having endlessly been rebuked by my English obsession with table manners, use your knife and fork.

'And then Michael had to eat with his fingers.'

Or that glorious time in New York, New York, when she went shopping with another ten year old, whose mother we were staying with. Linda, his mother, sent him off to Macey's to buy underpants. Off they went, confident, unsupervised, responsible. And came back an hour or so afterwards with a marvellous array of toys and a handful of candies; but without the underpants.

I remember watching a television interview with W. B. Yeats' children. I hadn't realized he had children.

'He wasn't much of a family man,' his son said, consideredly. Once in a while they saw him.

I don't think I was much of a family man, either. Most of my childhood seemed to be spent in daydreaming schemes to escape the family. Why else would I have come to Australia as soon as I finished university? The tyrants, Stendhal called his father and aunt who brought him up. The

foundations of his republicanism lay in the provincial family tyranny. Certainly it was the repressions and restrictions of the family that I remembered.

And then again being a writer ... I know I keep coming back to being a writer, but this after all is a written artifact, who else but a writer would be writing this topic? And this is no attempt to privilege the writer. An apology, rather. A guilty plea for exoneration. Writing you spend so much time at home, shut away, demanding silence, tyrannizing indeed over everyone else. Writing at odd hours, not wanting random visitors. Not writing, in the black despair of not writing. Rejection, refusal, in a black rage at publishers and editors. It is not a good model for a happy life for anyone else. Sunny tried to help. When my local dealer was arrested and the dope ran out, she offered to get me some at school. One of her classmates had amassed a fortune supplying. It was very tempting, but restraint and sanity prevailed. I was touched, however. For someone who heartily disapproved of drugs and alcohol, having seen the floor littered with awful literary giants pursuing the systematic deregulation of the senses, this was self-abnegating generosity indeed. Picking her up from piano lessons was no adequate equivalent.

It seems to me that it is easier to write about your parents than about your child. Even writing about parents is not that easy, and I haven't done it that often. I remember my parents' horror at various things other writers wrote or said about their parents. Richard Hoggart, who was a professor of English at Birmingham University when I was teaching there, appeared on television and spoke about his working-class parents. How the grime was engrained into the lines of their skin.

'What a terrible thing to say about your parents,' my mother said.

Writing about your working-class parents to tickle the palates of the bourgeoisie I soon saw was a rather dubious activity. But though I can think of many writers recording their parents, it is hard to think of many writing about their children. Maybe it doesn't work that way, maybe you naturally write about the tyrants you perceive as repressing you, to take Stendhal's formulation. Maybe you are still fighting the battles with your parents when you have children, and those old battles still preoccupy you.

Writing this, I had just finished reading Yi Mun-yol's novel *The Poet* about the life of the Korean wandering poet Kim Sakkat. Kim rejects everything bit by bit, upper-class society, lower-class society, revolutionary society. At one point he wanders back to see the family he has deserted but passes on without entering the house. Years later his son finally tracks him down. He hears his father muttering, but 'the thought that it might have been this very poetry that had drawn his father away from home provoked in him a silent revulsion'. 'People had told him that his father was a poet. But for Ik-kyun as a child, a poem meant the same as a curse.' In the end the attempt to bring his father home fails; the poet, who has developed shamanistic, magical powers leaves his son spellbound in bed and escapes. 'The man moving away in the glimmering darkness was not his father. He was a poet, and nothing else. A poet tied down by nothing in the whole world.'

And at this point the novel pretty well ends, with this vision of 'a man fulfilled as a poet; any further search, by means of words, spoken or written, is pointless. His death too, which followed soon after? Well, to end on a blunt note: a dead poet is no poet.'

It is a powerful and disturbing ending. Maybe it applies only to poets. Maybe fiction writers have more social connexion, more familial responsibility. I note that shortly after Kim Sakkat, having achieved completion as a poet, rejects his family yet once more, he dies.

Back to Morocco with the hashish dealer and his law student brother.

'"What does your father do?" Lydia asked.

'"He's a customs officer,' Mustapha said.

'Lydia made an involuntary noise reserved for police, customs officers.

'"No," said the law student, "he's a good man, a good father."

'"That's good," said Lydia, she liked the idea of good men, good fathers, affectionate families.

'"He is a good father. You know, like the movie. You know the movie."

'Marcus shook his head. Good fathers were rather out of fashion in the movies he ever saw.

'"*The Goodfather*, you must know the movie, our father is like the good father, he looks after his family, anybody in trouble he looks after them."

'"*The Goodfather*," said Mustapha, "you know, Marlon Brando."

'"Ah yes," said Marcus.

'The law student raved on. That was his idea of the good man, the good father. "I want to be a big shot. Lots of money. New York. You know."

'"I know," said Marcus.'

But rejecting all that, lots of money, New York, being a lawyer, all those values, did I have to omit my daughter from the story and become The Badfather?

On the Road

One time in Santa Barbara the novelist Ed Loomis told me about the importance of the automobile in the American psyche. Freedom. Escape from parents, escape from the family, escape from the suburbs, out onto the freeways and away. The young man's dream. Freedom. The varieties of marque and make, the exoticisms of style and trim, the machismo of horsepower and ride were secondary factors. They were important, no doubt, but it was the access to freedom that was the primary issue.

It wasn't an English experience. Not for me. In England the bicycle was our access to freedom, and the two long trips I took by bicycle round England were gruelling and exhausting. Of the freedoms I found in arriving in Australia, having a car was certainly an enduring one. Even if the individual cars didn't always endure.

My first car was a Morris Minor convertible, a happy little blue creature with a canvas roof, bought not long after I had taken up my lectureship in Sydney. It was my first permanent job. I had been a schoolteacher for a couple of terms, and for a few weeks at a time a postman, and a farm labourer, picking apples and beans and dabbing sheep with iodine solution to deter some fungus or fluke, and a milk-roundsman, and a bread-roundsman with an electric delivery truck. When the environmentally conscious sing the praises of electric cars, I can claim to have been in the forefront of such green machines. They ground slowly up the hills of the Midland suburbs.

I remember being in Oxford when I was offered the job in Sydney, and announcing I was going to go out to Australia and buy a Mustang and drive across the continent. Those were the days when the influence of Jack Kerouac first overtook me.

'Wrong car,' Margaret Walters, said, sniffily. An Australian graduate student, she had been acquiring English manners, and had perfected the sniffiness. She told me Australian cars were Holdens. It is the one brand I have still never owned, never even driven. Nor have I yet driven across the continent. But there were certainly Mustangs in Australia. Like the one Robert Adamson bought with his first Australia Council grant. The Beats were very influential in those decades.

In Sydney I had money for the first time and so, like Adamson, I bought my first car. John Simons, a lecturer in biology who broadcast for the ABC sold it to me. He was very fond of it, whenever he saw me he asked how it was going. It was going very well, considering its age. What a car for Australian summers, the roof down, the sun shining in. Later I realized convertibles were all very well back in England where you took every chance you could to get a bit of sun. But in a sunburnt country, shade was generally preferable, and a fixed roof an asset. But there it was, the roof down, and no one talked about skin cancer in those days.

It wasn't the sun that proved to be the problem, it was the rain. Those sudden summer

thunderstorms, when the car had been parked open to the elements, and the rain poured down and collected on the floor beneath the seats. And rusted the floor. That was the problem, the floor rusting away, not quite gone through the metal, but close.

Fish oil, I was advised. Coat it with fish oil. I dutifully bought a can of the stuff, a thick, sticky, sinister looking substance, more grease than oil. It smelled strongly of fish, which was only natural. I bought a brush. I coated the floor. And waited for it to dry or set or somehow become less viscous and adhesive. It never did. It stuck to the soles of my shoes, attached itself to the bottoms of my trousers which I should have worn rolled on the advice of the poet.

And then a couple of years later, sneaking off with a girl from a party, I skidded into a culvert in Balmain and the whole front end went out of shape.

'Oh, you silly goose,' I remember her saying.

I tried to drive it to a garage the next morning but the police ordered me off the road. They'd seen me around, they said. It was quite a distinctive car.

I tried to cannibalize it. Body parts. George Molnar, the logorrhoeic libertarian philosopher, had a Morris Minor saloon whose motor had died. We switched my motor into his. I'm not sure how we resolved who was to have the car. It didn't matter, anyway. It never ran properly. It wouldn't get up to speed. Some incompatibility somewhere in drive shafts, gearing, something or other. Like my relationship with George.

George went to England, lived on a commune, smoked dope, and came back a bicycle freak. It didn't stop him asking you to drive him to the pub or party afterwards. If you unwisely did, he would regale you for the entire journey with a denunciation of fossil fuels, environmentally unfriendly motor cars, and the rest of it.

The next car was a Jowett Javelin. This was a collector's car. The man who sold it me ran a restaurant in Paddington, The Lantern, fashionable in its day. But his first love was Jowett Javelins. Lots of them. He had four that I knew of. Polygamy. These days V-6s are common, but in those days the Javelin V-6 was unique. People were sceptical, contemptuous. V-8s, yes, big powerful brutes, but a V-6? Three cylinders on each side, an odd number, how could it work?

It worked pretty well except for a propensity to break pistons. Running off with another girl, the piston broke down in National Park, going up the hill at Waterfall. I was not lucky with second-hand cars. Nor with the girls in question. I left the Jowett with Moorhouse when I went back to England. I think he had agreed to use it and try to sell it, but he didn't. He said he found it a burden, even an imposition. He abandoned it somewhere at the side of the road, like a discarded girl.

Back in England for two years I decided I had learned my lesson. Something new, I decided. But what could I afford? In Britain in those days commercial vehicles carried a lower purchase tax than private cars. I bought a Minivan. I don't recall whether it was an Austin or a Morris. They were identical, except for the badges, one of those latter day weirdnesses of British car manufacturing, before British car manufacturers put themselves out of business. William Morris had been born in my

home town, used to have a bicycle shop there, so a Morris would have been true to local patriotism. On the other hand I was lecturing in Birmingham where Austins came from. Later the Minis were rebadged as Leylands and, I think, BMCs, before the British Motoring Corporation went bust altogether, hastened in its demise by the ill-fated Australian P-76. Never had one of them, but I was tempted.

The Minivan was a nifty little grey creature that hurtled between Oxford where I was living and Birmingham where I taught. The only catch was commercial vehicles were prohibited from travelling at more than forty miles per hour. No problem. No problem until I overtook a police car one evening in the Vale of Evesham. My first speeding ticket.

Being a van, it had seats only in the front. You could fit two or three people into the back, but it was somewhat uncomfortable for them, sitting on the metal floor, leaning on the metal sides, chill in the English winters. English summers, too. But it had its advantages. For me, anyway. If it was a particularly annoying passenger in the back, I could always take corners or roundabouts at speed, and hear whoever it was being hurtled from side to side, sliding across the floor, bouncing off the sides. Poor Bruce Clunies Ross, as argumentative as me, but I held the steering wheel and when he was being particularly perverse, I could always dismiss his argument with a quick swerve. Thump-whump. There you are Bruce, don't talk nonsense.

Back in Sydney, what should I buy? The question was answered with extraordinary generosity by Ron Dunlop in the English department. He gave me a Humber Super Snipe. No small gift this, but a huge, long, stately black limousine. Like a military staff car. Then as now, and in between, were the days of imperialist wars, opposed by most of the population. In those days anti-war protestors often wore army surplus clothing. Radical chic, it was called. The staff car image may have been similarly paradoxical for a pacifist, but what was wrong with paradox? It was a marvellous car. All Ron asked was to keep his number plate.

'No way I can remember a new one,' he said, as we stood at the staff club bar. He kept his personalized numberplate, I took the car. What a gem.

It was long and sometimes a bit unwieldy. I nearly demolished the verandah of the Forth and Clyde hotel one Saturday evening, misjudging the bend. Girls still come up to me, recalling being given a lift. It was a huge car, lots of people could pack into it for a lift to a party, impossible to remember them all.

In the end age overtook it and I could not get it re-registered. I traded it in for a tiny white Mini. The mini, a car not a van this time, was very nippy. People braked nervously as I zoomed up behind them; those were the days when the police drove souped-up Minis. It came to a sorry end in East Sydney. Girl trouble again. I'd been kicked out, or I'd left; preoccupied, I suppose. I collided with a tow-truck drumming up business. Good Samaritans took me to St Vincent's hospital where my wounds were patched up and the blood flow staunched. As I was tottering back down the road one of the libertarians from the pub, Lyn Gain, called out to me from the psychiatric hospital where she'd

been banged away. I stood bloodstained on the pavement and she leaned out of the window and we chatted for a while.

Adamson's ex-girl friend Denise offered me a room in her house. The window in the door was broken and there was blood all over the hallway from where Bob had severed an artery or a vein, punching the glass. Blood of a poet, to recall one of the slogans of those times. Or trouble with girls, as Kingsley Amis phrased it, to recall another one.

I decided Minis were too small and vulnerable in these dangerous times. I bought a Ford Falcon station wagon. From 950 cc to 4.1 litres. The great white whale, it was fondly called. We were a literary lot.

It was a good car to get away in. Put down the back seat, put in a mattress, somewhere to sleep. Except by then the world was changing, no longer could you just pull over and sleep, wardens and rangers and other paramilitary auxiliaries patrolled the likely spots. Up near Byron Bay we were threatened with a $2000 fine. Almost the cost of the car. Park in the official camping sites, we were instructed. Who wants to be stuck in a caravan park with hundreds of others? The erosion of individual liberties had begun, our birthright to sleep anywhere beneath the stars had been stolen from us. Along with a lot of other things. So much for freedom.

The great white whale survived more than its share or bumps and bruises. At a British Council reception one evening I remember becoming drunk and exasperated and assuring them they were obviously, as indeed the whole world knew, a bunch of spies, because they certainly knew nothing about culture. Not an especially wise career move. Then I scraped a bus and a bit later sideswiped a few parked cars. The entire side of the Falcon was pummelled. I was mortified.

'You've got insurance,' said Pat Woolley. 'That's what insurance is for, get it fixed, forget it.'

Californian pragmatism versus my guilt-laden English Puritanism. I remember on another occasion that Peter Powditch, one of whose paintings was featured on the cover of *Living Together*, insisted I let him out on Pyrmont Bridge when I was driving a car load of drunken carousers to a party in Balmain, none too sober myself.

In the end the panel beater refused to fix it any more. I traded it in for a big red sin bin, a Falcon van. The mattress permanently in the back. An ants' nest in the front from having been too long unsold in the dealer's yard.

Back up to Byron, on to Mackay and the beach where the turtles mated. My novel *Pacific Highway* had just been published, and we went up the highway and beyond to celebrate. The van was big and red and other vehicles got out of the way as we bore down on them. On the back bumper was a sticker with a modified Eureka flag, marijuana leaves instead of stars. 'What's that flag on your van?' asked the girl in the staff club as she made my sandwiches. Don'o Kim persuaded me to sell it to him so he could transport timber to rebuild his house. It gave another twenty years service to Kim, even though he never quite finished the house.

After that it was a Mitsubishi Colt. Another oddity, it had a dual transmission system. Two sets of

gear ratios. You moved a lever to engage one set or the other. It was an ordinary Colt. My gun-toting colleague Dr Bee said the Colt 45 sounded more like his sort of car. It was the first of my modern, efficient, low maintenance generation of vehicles. It gave no trouble. I recall no anecdotes. Then Kim told me the Koreans used a higher grade steel than the Japanese. Safer. I bought a Hyundai at his recommendation. 'You should have got a Daewoo,' he said. Predictably. He might have been slow to finish his novel and his house over the decades, but he was always quick to indicate my errors.

'Which has been your best car?' John Dale asked me.

'The Hyundai,' I said.

He looked at me slightly surprised, shocked even, clearly a car freak. I thought he was going to rescind his invitation to contribute to his anthology *Car Lovers*. I explained it was trouble-free, economical, anonymous. Even the motoring correspondent of the *Spectator*, that high Tory English journal of privilege, wealth and status, recommended the Hyundai and its five-year 150,000 kilometre guarantee. 'For worry-free motoring, it doesn't get better than that.'

What do you want in a car? Just basic transport. Speed cameras, cops with laser gear, Highway Patrol with unmarked vehicles, who wants expensive high performance cars, they only get you into trouble. Trouble with cars, trouble with girls, I've had quite enough trouble over the years. For a while the Hyundai I drove was an Accent. It reminded me of England where accent is so important in placing you in terms of class and therefore acceptability.

'Oh Gawd, Mike, what a dreadful Australian accent you've got,' Deborah Thomson said to me when I went back to England once. I hadn't. It was my same old Midland's accent, regional proletarian somewhat reduced by Oxford, but that was something the metropolitan middle-classes had never had much experience of. Nor had the aggressive Scotsman at the Newcastle bar who accused me of being one of those Australians who'd tried to pick up an English accent. So, an Accent: cunningly, the Koreans didn't specify what sort.

There have been other cars. Listing all the girls you've known has never been considered gentlemanly. I feel similarly inhibited about listing the cars. There do seem to have been rather a lot of them.

The *Tabloid Story* Story

We came up with the idea of producing a packaged short story magazine as a supplement to other large circulation host journals as we sat on the balcony of the Balmain Volunteer, a wine bar Frank used to frequent: Carmel Kelly, Frank Moorhouse and I. We had become increasingly dissatisfied with the literary quarterlies in Australia, feeling that their editorial selection of fiction was out of phase with the new fiction being written. This was mid-1972. Before setting up *Tabloid Story* we had tried to place our fiction with existing media - predominantly the literary quarterlies and little magazines. Gerry Wilkes who edited *Southerly* was open in his taste and readily published new work from me, Vicki, Frank, Adamson and others. But *Meanjin* and *Overland* were generally unwelcoming. Occasionally there had been mavericks in the overground scene. In Sydney Jack de Lissa, Ron Smith and later Gareth Powell had been publishing good, exciting new fiction in *Squire, Casual* and *Chance International* in the late 60s. These provided outlets for the new writing. Their editors didn't have that orientation to particular traditions of the short story that the literary magazines seemed stuck to. Of course these magazines were sexist and male chauvinist. The women's movement attacks on them now are well known. At the time we wrote for them, male chauvinism and sexism were not terms we had heard; the women's movement was not in existence. I didn't have any formulated intellectualized objections to the magazines since no critiques of sexism and chauvinism had been developed. I was simply always terribly embarrassed about going to newsagents and looking to see if the latest issue had run a story of mine, in which case I would begin the process of hassles involved in getting paid.

To us at that time the girlie magazines provided almost the only outlets for work that dealt with sexuality, for works that weren't committed to the old outback tale and other formulae that the established literary quarterlies ran. The girlie magazines were open to new sorts of writing – in part, for sure, because people bought the magazines to look at the tits – pre-pubic hair days, these were. It didn't matter too much about the stories since few people probably read them; but the editors and publishers nonetheless did read them, did have an idea of a new writing, did have a belief in a new prose. And those editors had a wider, non-academic, non-establishment taste than the editors of the quarterlies and of the respectable publishing houses. The girlie magazines were the first onslaught on bourgeois sexual repression; the women's movement critique of sexism could only operate after sexism had at least become explicit in the society. After the taboos had been broken down, then the values embodied in sexuality could be verbalized, expressed – and examined. Before the girlie magazines began, the total repression of sexuality in writing, with a huge list of banned books prohibited entry to Australia, served as a form of social and political control. But the commercial, capitalist imperative of making a buck, providing new products for the market, finally won out in the struggle with the establishment puritan

authoritarianism; capitalism's contradictions allowed a liberalisation; sex surfaced because it was profitable; for a while the new writing found a medium that could carry it along. In the end, tits were not enough; pubes were imperative; gradually, print was replaced by more and more pictures. In the old days pre-publication censorship operated on a percentage system; the magazine could have 'x' amount of naked breasts as long as it had 'y' amount of clothed bathing beauties and an amount of print. But it was naked breasts and, soon, full frontal nudity to use a phrase of the time, that sold the magazines – and in the end fiction was dropped from those magazines that survived here; the magazines themselves evolved into raunchier and raunchier forms. And the imported magazines from the U.K. and U.S.A., allowed in with censorship liberalisation, drove the local products out of existence; the local ones that survived had no literary parasitic component. The full financial story about this whole area will probably never be told – fascinating study in the sociology of literature as it would be. But a lot of money was involved; overground magazine publishers; local printers; Asian printers; importers; and the maverick local publishers; the conflict between these various interest groups could only be resolved by the eventual 'rationalization' of the industry; some went to the wall.

By 1972, *Squire, Casual* and *Chance* had folded, and *Man* followed them into extinction in 1974. After years of publication we never knew how many people actually read the stories in the girlie magazines – but with circulations of between 40,000 and 100,000 they offered some chance of getting a writer an audience. The literary quarterlies back then circulated between 1,000 and 3,000 – and much of that was dead circulation; straight into institutional library stacks. Today their circulations are considerably lower and the stacks are being purged. The little magazines probably circulated 100 to 300 copies. The few people who did read these publications were already committed to literature. We wanted to reach that new audience that normally wouldn't pick up the quarterlies with their daunting, expensive, permanent-seeming format and never encounter the ephemeral little magazines.

Back in 1966 Moorhouse had experimented with *City Voices,* an inner city paper purportedly and somewhat belatedly modelled on the original New York *Village Voice* concept of a decade earlier. *City Voices* was unexciting, lasted five issues and never reached its break-even circulation of 1,500. Then around 1969-70 the libertarian left, or individuals associated with that anarchist individualist group like Wendy Bacon, had decided to move beyond the duplicated *Broadsheet* of the Sydney Libertarians, and gained control of the University of New South Wales student paper, *Tharunka.* After losing control they set up *Thorunka,* which mutated into *Thor.* Moorhouse collected for them a 'Special Supplement of Unacceptable Literary Works' as a 16 page anti-censorship gesture and a way of getting our stories into print. It was a forerunner of *Tabloid Story,* though it included poetry and statements as well as fiction. The tabloid format of the student and underground press, of *Rolling Stone,* indeed just of 'the press' was appropriated on behalf of the short story. It showed stories worked well in the format. And stories were regularly published in *Thorunka* and *Thor.*

So when we settled on the tabloid format for *Tabloid Story*, it was a development of something we had already had experience of. The same line of thinking was obviously going on elsewhere; our first issue was just out when we were mailed a copy of *Fiction*, a tabloid from New York devoted to new stories; and that was soon followed by the tabloid *American Poetry Review*.

'Hide them,' said Frank, 'otherwise everyone will think we copied the idea.'

'*Zeitgeist*,' suggested Brian Kiernan, who joined us early on as our fourth editor, initially in Melbourne. He was writing a monograph on *Criticism* and had taken to uttering these heavy European terms.

But apart from using tabloid format and publishing 'new fiction,' *Fiction* was an orthodox literary magazine. The tabloid format of *Tabloid Story* was only one part of the concept we had. Packaging the magazine as an already edited and designed supplement was the most revolutionary idea. In the 1950s Frank Hardy and other realist writers had joined together to syndicate their stories round the trade union newspapers. But the mode we evolved was that we would produce not single stories for syndication, but an entire packaged magazine, already edited, typeset, designed and camera-ready to insert in an already established publication. This way we got access to the host paper's circulation – without having to build up sales ourselves, without having to sell advertising, deal with newsagency distribution, or arrange printing. The host magazine taking *Tabloid Story* would give us a run-on of 2,000 copies of the supplement for us to distribute to subscribers, contributors, bookshops and as complimentaries and exchanges with other magazines internationally.

We had the optimistic idea that we would be able to sell those 2000 run-on copies around the bookshops. But buying books and literary journals from bookshops is one thing; trying to sell them books and journals is something else again. It is a grueling task, and it produced some memorable moments. Eve Abbey reminded me of one such episode.

'I seem to remember both you and Frank coming into Abbey's in the Queen Victoria Building, to the big counter at the back where we unpacked, and persuading us to take copies. I was very enthusiastic at the time as I really liked short stories and they seemed to be disappearing.'

Eve recalled dealing with Moorhouse and me, but there was a third editor, Carmel Kelly. The reason Eve makes no mention of her is that as we stood outside Town Hall, summoning up courage to sell our wares, Carmel had a sudden and what seemed to us a very convenient panic attack.

'I really don't feel well,' she said. 'I don't think I can do it. I'll just have to go home. Don't worry, I'll get a bus.'

And she was gone.

We stood in George Street wondering could we just walk away too? But we had the magazine, bundles of it. We had to get it into the shops, we had to charm or cajole, beg, expose ourselves to the booksellers' acid assessments, appeal to the lost categories of art and innovation, literature. We stood there still stunned at Carmel's disappearance. Envying the simplicity of her

refusal. The way she just said no. Where did she get the strength? But pride demanded we went through with our self-appointed trials. We breathed in deeply and entered Abbey's.

To be free of those problems of printing and distributing and building up a circulation, problems that nearly always destroy literary magazines, we were happy to give the edited and designed package for free to the host. We had little alternative. When we began *Tabloid Story* most editors did not believe readers wanted stories and we had to persuade them to run an issue as an experiment. One of the associated purposes of *Tabloid Story* – which often seemed to be as much a strategy as a magazine – was to encourage magazines that hadn't run stories before to run them now – as *Nation Review* and *National Times* indeed soon began to, and continued to do, as a direct result of *Tabloid Story. Tabloid Story* was part of a strategy to promote the short story and to get better conditions for short story writers. We thought of the magazine as a writers' action product – born of necessity and continued by people who saw themselves primarily as writers, not editors. And so we introduced into our editorial practice certain improvements on the treatment we had received from other magazines. Frank drew up a list of 'the little things' we did in our relations with contributors:

a. We didn't require them to type.

b. We didn't make them pay for a reply – the literary magazines were the only business in the world which required that their clients pay for the courtesy of a reply – usually a form-reply (although we appreciated the same as cost saving).

c. We made personal comments on the stories (which were not always appreciated).

d. We supplied multiple copies to contributors.

e. We paid on acceptance – not publication.

We broke that haughtiness and contempt and discourtesy, still found in literary magazines, by recognizing contributors as the source of life for a little magazine.

We couldn't have launched the magazine without a subsidy. With no money changing hands between *Tabloid Story* and the host journal, with hardly any bookshop income (since *Tabloid Story* was appearing as a supplement to papers already on sale or given away free) we were utterly dependent on a grant. In mid-1972 the Commonwealth Literary Fund was floating the idea of subsidizing a new literary magazine: the idea of starting a magazine explicitly for 'young writers' was raised but we weren't interested in that feeler. We wanted to see a magazine for new writing but the age of the writer was immaterial. We also wanted a magazine that would pay its contributors. The literary quarterlies up to this point had been paying writers between $10 and $40 for a contribution: the subsidies they received benefited not the writer (who was supposed to be grateful for getting into print) but the printer. *Tabloid Story* was in the forefront of the freelance rates war. It was the first literary magazine to pay the Australian Society of Authors recommended minimum rate – and from the beginning we made public our payment rate – again the first time that a literary magazine had done this. Henry Lawson's 'The Union Buries its Dead' was one of our classics; and we stood by the

principle of union action for adequate payment for the living. This was in part a calculated attempt to campaign to raise payments and to force by example other magazines to declare their rates of payment. Stephen Murray-Smith of *Overland* and Clem Christesen of *Meanjin* complained bitterly; but once *Tabloid Story* had publicized the issue there was no going back. The Literature Board made it official policy that magazines receiving subsidies should declare publicly in each issue how much they paid contributors.

The costing formula we established allocated two thirds of our budget to contributors, and one third to production. The conventional literary quarterly worked on the opposite ratio – or even less favourably inclined to the writer: two thirds or more to printing, one third or less to contributors.

We received a trial subsidy of $2000 and produced our first two issues. Matt Peacock was editing the Australian Union of Students national paper, *National U,* distributed free on every Australian university campus. He took number one. *Nation Review*, the weekly published by Gordon Barton and edited by Richard Walsh, took number two. Each of these sixteen page issues had a print run of 50-60,000 copies, incredible for a literary magazine. I got Kevin Brooks, who had designed *Balcony*, to design number one. He used shots from the movie of 'The Phallic Forest' to illustrate the story. An attempt to drum up some publicity for the movie which was now released. Frank complained bitterly that my story was the only one illustrated, and insisted we used a different designer for the second issue.

Then came the general election, Labor in office, and the suspension of the Commonwealth Literary Fund's activities and the great hiatus before the Literature Board of the Council of the Arts (the name was later changed to the Australia Council) got into operation. We were receiving a flood of manuscripts, but we had spent our $2000. Establishing the nature of the magazine for the first two issues we had used stories by writers whose work we knew, the new fiction that we knew was around, along with our own work. Frank had been editing Angus & Robertson's short story anthology *Coast to Coast,* and this gave him a pretty good idea of one segment of the traditional short story field as well as of the new writing. I had come across other material in the course of the anti-war readings that had been going on for a while – there were a number of stories in the anthology that came out of that movement *We Took Their Orders And Are Dead*. And there had been the Balmain readings of Prose and Poetry. This was what we drew on. We used two unsolicited stories in No. 2 but the big flood of unsolicited material didn't begin to arrive until after No. 2 had to be on the *Nation Review* presses to fit in with their schedules, and Christmas-New Year reading.

We knew there was good prose around that wasn't surfacing into the quarterlies or the overground publishing houses; we knew once we got *Tabloid Story* going, it would attract a lot more new prose we didn't even know about, people we had never read, heard of or encountered. This is what happened. We shaped the first two issues from the available materials – and shaped them to show the sort of new writing we wanted to encourage – no more formula bush tales, no more restrictions to the beginning, middle and end story, no more preconceptions about a well rounded tale.

The manuscripts that then began to come in after the first two issues got around further radicalised the magazine, opened it up even more from the initial as we thought open conceptions we began with.

Our emphasis was open, not restrictive. It was the domination of the formula bush tales, the straight narrative that we objected to; we didn't publish them because they were well catered for. We wanted to provide space for the varieties of stories that weren't being catered for.

The weight put on the nationalist 1890**s** by the new nationalist critics of the 1930s, 40s and 50s like P. R. Stephensen and Vance and Nettie Palmer produced its particular and predominant version of Australian literary tradition. Its negative results are obvious: firstly, a tightening up of the 'nationality' criterion with a devaluing of writers not actually born in Australia – Marcus Clarke, Adam Lindsay Gordon and Henry Kingsley for instance; a stress on 'national' traditions rather than on international literary connections; and an assumption that anything before the 1890s was derivative writing, merely imitative of English modes, second hand, second rate, colonial. The more positive emphases of the myth are a stressing of those literary forms that found especial flowering in the 1890s as representative, typical and expressively Australian forms. So there was the nationalist cult of the short story, with Henry Lawson as the particular native genius and the fount and source. The Australian story began with Lawson, the myth read: so anthology after anthology of Australian short stories was produced beginning with Lawson. Until Cecil Hadgraft edited *The Australian Short Story Before Lawson* in 1986 it was forgotten that anyone even wrote stories before Lawson, except by a few of us writing about Marcus Clarke, for instance. Yet there had been a host of magazine writers from the 1850s and 60s onwards. And this lapse of memory produced a distorted picture of the literary history of Australia.

Marcus Clarke's stories show at least three distinct strands of story writing. There are his realistic stories and sketches of Australian up-country life, that led on to Lawson; there are his formula magazine stories, melodramatic, plotted, sensational; and there are his experimental, metaphysical and fantasy stories. But the later reduction of this early variety of the short story to the single mythic line of the outback story, a reduction fostered by the new nationalist critics, immensely damaged Australian writing. With the emphasis on the Lawson tradition, the new nationalists implied that there was only one sort of story worth writing; indeed, as far as any critical comment or anthologists' selection went, it seemed that there was only one sort of story being written: realistic, upcountry, outback, bush stories. They were leavened in the *Coast to Coast* annuals with episodes of suburban malaise, the earlier tales of the outback and pioneers transmuting into exposés of suburbia, from the plain account of the harsh environment to the harsh account of the plain environment. Murray Bail's 'The Drover's Wife', which first appeared in *Tabloid Story*, indeed enacted and encapsulated that mutation and reduction – with a further mutation into a trivializing modernist mode of allusion, collage, formal alienation.

A narrow, reduced tradition of the short story had been taking its increasingly barren way on; it had become established, enshrined, protected and the literary magazines gave it a home. While all

the other things that could be done with short fiction were neglected; or at least rarely saw the light of publication. Yet if we look back to the full range of Clarke's stories of the 1870s, we can see a plurality of form and traditions. Then there was an internationalism, an eclecticism, a richness of literary culture: which became reduced to the narrow, utilitarian, insular, aggressively anti-experimental, philistinely parochial 'write Australia' line: something caused not so much by the nationalistic nineties writers, but by the new nationalist theorists, critics and publishers and magazine editors from the 1930s through the 1950s. People like Dal Stivens, a brilliant fabulist and experimentalist, had suffered beneath the domination of the reduced outback suburban prose line, and we eagerly published him in *Tabloid Story*.

The new prose that we gave a home to was initially often urban, inner city— dealing with things that had been taboo: sex, then drugs. There was something of a move back to the country for themes and lifestyles during the life of *Tabloid Story*, but it was a different country from the Lawson vision. *Tabloid Story* was committed to the variety or the new prose. There were the fabulists, notably; they tended also to be writers whose emphasis is on the finished fable, on the rendered artefact. Clarke experimented in these areas in the 1860s and 70s. Contemporary models, however, tended to be non-Australian for the new writers: Borges, Cortazar, Casares, Calvino, Barthelme. Dal Stivens, Peter Carey, and Rudi Krausmann and I all worked in that area and helped establish that fable line in *Tabloid Story*.

Then there was the literature of process, fiction interested in, self-conscious of, its own evolution, aware of its generative process: the analogues here would be Kerouac and the beat tradition of spontaneous writing; and the Black Mountain version of that from Charles Olson. We had a couple of stories from Fielding Dawson together with Kris Hemensley and John Jenkins amongst others in this area. We also had Moorhouse's story about the Kerouac wake, one of those events that had spontaneously generated its own myth, replying to my own version of the event that *Stand* published.

Then there was the confessional, revelatory mode, less defined by its manner than by its materials – sexuality, drugs, inner city bohemian life styles, despairs and ecstasies. Moorhouse, Vicki Viidikas, Bill Beard, Sandy Slater and I belong in part here. Kerouac, Charles Bukowski and Henry Miller were international analogues. Amy Witting's 'A Piece of this Puzzle is Missing' was written as a response to this note in *Tabloid Story* but its critical perspective was missed by the writers of 200 letters to *Education* when the story appeared in a *Tabloid Story* there; they, the Minister for Education, and Murdoch's *Daily Mirror* ran horror stories about the moral tone.

And we also had a residual relationship with the socialist realist story; our attitudes might vary towards it, but all of us – Moorhouse, Carmel Kelly, Brian Kiernan and myself – had some fascination with it either as an intractable dead-end, or as a possibility for development, as political, as activist. John Emery and Gary Taylor both wrote stories that were in that tradition and Emery's 'Caravan Park' was later filmed by Phil Noyce.

This, then, was our range, these were the alternatives to the 'Lawson tradition.' Not that we had anything against Lawson himself. We ran a rare photograph of him from the Walter Stone collection in one issue. Carmel put in one of Miles Franklin from the collection, too. Brian Kiernan later edited a selection of Lawson for Laurie Hergenhan's Portable Australian Authors series with the University of Queensland Press.

In 1969 Moorhouse and I had drawn up the proposals for a paperback format magazine of new writing based on the southern hemisphere. The backing was never delivered. Some of the background work I channelled into a series of books I was editing for University of Queensland Press, 'Asian and Pacific Writing,' and originally we planned to have a strong Asian and international component in *Tabloid Story.* We ran two stories by writers appearing in the University of Queensland Press series: Nick Joaquin in the first issue, and Harry Aveling's translation of Pramoedya Ananta Toer (who had been confined on the Indonesian Buru prison island since 1965) in *Tabloid Story* 2. In later issues we had stories from Fielding Dawson, Henry James Korn, Richard Kostelanetz, Lorna Tracy, Kathy Cecil, and Roger Jones. But our internationalism was more contextual than central, and in the anthology I later edited, *The Tabloid Story Pocket Book*, I drew only on the Australian material. Australian residents, that is. Carol Novack was included, though later she returned to the USA.

But something needs to be said about nationalism and internationalism. When I introduced an issue of *Stand* devoted to the 'New Australian Writing' in 1975 I argued that something happened in Australian writing around 1968-69. Some time then a huge gulf opened between what had been appearing before and the new writing that appeared afterwards. Though all the different manners continued to co-exist, of course; and some things may have been written before and had had to wait for the new climate for publication The Vietnam war was one of the biggest stimuli; it drew Australia out of a comfortable, non-political ease into a society dramatically divided within itself once again. The Liberal-Country Party coalition government had committed Australia to the war to be part of international affairs, to be an American ally and to attract American capital, after the English Labour government had stopped the outflow of British capital. And Australia did become part of the international world straight away. Part of an international movement of protest, riot, draft resistance, medical aid to North Vietnam, police brutality, secret police files, repression and resistance, underground newspapers, broadsheets, student power, university sit-ins and occupations, anti-war concerts and readings, sabotage, the CIA, etc. Even those writers who were not and still are not conscious of political issues were caught up in the frenzy of activity, the enthusiasm, the surge of creativity.

It was an international war and the models Australia followed to oppose it were international. An access to new cultural materials ensued. And the new writing that established itself was an international new writing. There has always been a strand in Australian art that believes the appropriate, indeed the only, role for an Australian is to express Australianess. But the new wave of Australian writers initially had little interest at all in nationalism. The writers saw themselves simply

as writers; they hadn't immersed themselves in the works of the 'classic' Australian writers – Clarke, Gordon, Kendall, Lawson, Furphy, Brennan, Henry Handel Richardson; they had probably read hardly any Patrick White. I wrote this in *Stand* and it was soon reported back to me, by David Malouf I think though I could be wrong, that White was far from amused. But I had not meant it as in any way a criticism of his work, just an observation of what my contemporaries were reading. Their reading was in contemporary writing whatever its nationality – from the USA, from Latin America, from Europe – not much from England any more.

Though the new writers may not have consciously been concerned with expressing Australianess, though some would conceive of themselves as 'writers', as supra-nationals, the context in which they worked was Australian. Even at their most imitatively American, they demonstrated their Australianess in revealing the new domination of all areas of Australian cultural and economic life by the USA. Especially the counterculture. I think now that the belief that writers were writers, a supra-national camaraderie, is probably the ideology of political control – of imperialism, of the establishment, of the multi-national corporation world that we live in: British, USA and Russian imperialism obviously cultivated the belief. 'Internationalism' means having the product of the economically dominant imperialist aggressor thrust onto the market of the second or third world consumer; literature is as much a product as any other manufactured commodity, and it bears an ideological message as part of its identity.

But advocating in reprisal the specifically Australian is something that is of ambiguous signification. It is a problematical position, and David Lodge once told me, 'I think you Australian writers do yourselves a disservice by stressing your Australianess.' Moreover mere nationalism merely mystifies. Unless the nationalistic proclamations have a radical economic analysis behind them, then they are simple window dressing, false advertising, puppeteering. The problem for Australian writers at that time, and probably today, is that the 'Australian' proclamations have seemed to be the preserve of the conservative and reactionary, both politically and aesthetically. And the celebration of rural Australia has seemed to be more the preserve of the nationalist conservative than of a radical or alternative consciousness.

After the first two sixteen page issues, *Tabloid Story* began to encounter different circumstances. We had spent our first $2,000, there was no money coming in, and there was a flood of manuscripts. Rather than producing nothing at all we got out a four page issue in *Honi Soit*, February 28, 1973, called No. 3 Part 1, though there were never any further parts to No. 3. We didn't like producing an issue that circulated only in one restricted area (the Sydney University campus) but we didn't like producing nothing at all. The four page issue looked very thin, we told the writers to wait hopefully for payment, the new Literature Board was reputedly unfavorable to the issue; but towards the middle of the year we finally got given a new subsidy and around October we finally received the cheque. The long delays in receiving subsidies experienced in the early days of the Australia Council activities made things hard, particularly negotiating with host journals. And 1973

was a disastrous year for finding hosts. The surfing magazine *Tracks* liked the idea but then decided it wasn't their sort of material. *The Digger* said yes they would do it, then no, yes, no, and decided the communal identity of the self-styled counter-cultural *Digger* couldn't accommodate an alien insert. The weekly *National Times* was sort of interested in the idea, though unhappy that *Nation Review* had already done it, and anyhow had problems about four-letter words, sex, filth, and that sort of stuff; we tried to select from the material that had been coming in some nice clean copy for the sensibilities of the Fairfax press but it made an unbalanced grouping and *National Times* decided they didn't think the stories were any good. They ran their own supplement of just out of copyright Henry Lawson stories, and later some syndicated 1920s U.S.A. stories. When *Tabloid Story* under new editors finally cracked *National Times,* it was with a very safe group of by then known writers. The Teachers' Federation journal *Education* agreed to do an issue but rejected the copy we presented. We decided that the copy that came in had a discouraging appearance; but some of the good fiction we received came in the messiest, handwritten, barely legible copy; we made a point of not demanding 'double-spaced typescript only' as *Meanjin* announced. We began to typeset copy we wanted to use in advance of any specific issues – so host journals could see the stories more appetisingly; this made us even more dependent on a grant for forward planning – for money to pay the typesetting before we had an issue on which to claim the subsidy. *Showbusiness* agreed to do an issue and we presented it to them already pasted up. They rejected it.

These were the hazards that the *Tabloid Story* concept involved, hazards we didn't know about until they happened. Moorhouse decided we were out of touch with the community or the community was out of touch with new writing and suggested we should all resign. The fatigue of reading fiction manuscripts, the fatigue of having to continually assess and decide on what went in and what didn't, and our dislike of this role of adjudication was taking its toll. We considered donating the magazine to the Literature Board. Carmel Kelly had already withdrawn from active involvement. Brian Kiernan our Melbourne editor had moved to Sydney so we didn't have anyone in Melbourne, and we felt we were missing out both on good stories and on potential host magazines. We tried to work out what was wrong.

The 'new writing' we were selecting often dealt with sex. Not always, not compulsively, not inevitably – but often; and this was getting us into problems with the straight papers that were potential host magazines. We had no intention of censoring or of rejecting material because of its sexual component – if you do that you don't have any new writing. But the first issue had been in trouble in Queensland when the Brisbane Vice Squad received complaints about Moorhouse's 'The Oracular Story' and seized all copies from the University of Queensland campus. Apparently the whole absurd business involved some student political dispute, and the case anyway was dismissed. With the second issue the distributors of *Nation Review* in Queensland and Western Australia demanded that one of the stories should be removed from all copies distributed in those states – so 'The Nembutal Story' (which I had written in response to Moorhouse's 'Oracular Story' after he

presented it to me in a somewhat challenging way) was replaced by a blank page and a half in those editions.

These were days of change. Australia had been living in a very protected, repressive environment of official censorship under the old Liberal-Country party coalition. Those were the years of the great taboos. The old four letter words. Would you want your servant to read these? as the judge in the English trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* put it. And so, confronting taboos, as writers everywhere properly feel compelled to do, we confronted the great suppression of sexual terms, words that could be uttered round the bicycle sheds but not put into print. I suppose if this was still the 60s, I would list those words. But it isn't so I'll spare us all that. And of course, it was not only the words, but the activities and attitudes in which the words might be utilized. They were taboo, too.

For those of us beginning our writing careers then, these restraints were idiotic. The list of banned books contained titles by Henry Miller, D. H. Lawrence, Leonard Cohen, Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, James Joyce and many more. Lawrence and Joyce had been writing fifty years ago. Copies of most of the banned books circulated. In our own practice we disregarded the taboos on four-letter words and sexual incidents. It meant, of course, that there were constant skirmishes with printers, publishers, editors, magistrates and such like. As Thackeray wrote in *Vanity* Fair, back in 1849, 'The curses to which the General gave a low utterance ... were so deep that I am sure no compositor would venture to print them were they written down' (Chapter xxix). It was a grotesque situation and it put Australia in the category of Ireland and South Africa and Franco's Spain. But that was the dominant environment.

There were endless battles in the early seventies over four-letter words and sexual content. Looking back on it all now, this issue seems to have been pretty much a diversion. The libertarians focused on taboo words, while substantive issues of political and economic change were displaced from attention. The censorship battles were a smokescreen behind which late industrial capitalism globalised.

And that brings me to another absence. The political. I will list these words since they are still pretty well repressed. Words like class and work and repression and exploitation and labour and unions and so on. The literary tradition which was dominant when I began writing was at great pains to deny the political. I think the denial is even greater now. At least during the 1950s there were the public purges, the McCarthyite denunciations of leftists in the movies, in government, in the universities. There was clearly a battle going on, the cold war. There were clearly radical intellectuals and writers who were being harassed and dismissed and destroyed. Now that battle seems to be over. There is no obvious left left. Even through the literary festivals of the 1970s, there would be Frank Hardy or Judah Waten sitting in the audience, making derisive asides, committed interjections, or just heckling. But not any longer. During that cold war period, of course, the cultural pressure was to avoid the political in your writing. Australian fiction, following English and American fiction, retreated from political engagement. That great tradition of Henry Lawson, Katherine Susannah

Prichard and Christina Stead was silenced. The same was true of literary criticism. The problem with English studies in – and out of – the universities has always been that the focus is on a safe sort of formalism, on not looking at the work in its context of political history. The New Critics and Leavisites were dealing with language, subtlety, irony (all things that are certainly deeply part of literature); what was missed was any engagement with meaning, with ideas, with social context. The varieties of literary theory continue that same avoidance today. Busily confronting the repression of four letter words, we were in danger of turning our attention away from political repressions. Looking back on it, with a more political analysis, that looks like a cunning political strategy. Sexuality proved to be profitable: there was money to be made in four letter words, in sexploitation: and more than money, there was the potential for control. An obsessively sexualized culture absorbed the energies of the consumers and distracted attention from political and social issues. Fortunately, or perhaps more correctly, tragically, there have always been political and social issues that couldn't be repressed. Despite all the sex and drugs, the issues would not go away, and we, or some of us, tried as best we could to engage with them. At the time, however, I was swept along in the anti-censorship struggle along with many others.

The Filipino novelist Frankie José once asked me, 'What are the greatest injustices in your country?' It took me aback. This was not the sort of question novelists asked any more. That tradition of writing novels about social injustice, of engaging with political debate, which characterizes his work, is threatening to become lost to us. So now – as always – it is a matter of rediscovering ways in which to deal with those issues. Of attempting to recreate that role for fiction of being something other than distraction or diversion or evasion. Of finding ways of engaging, even obliquely, with substantial issues. It may be that engaging obliquely is the only way to do it. After all, that is one of the reasons people began writing fiction anyway. It has rarely been possible to write the truth. You have to pretend it is fiction, and then insert the troublesome ideas, the disturbing observations, the explosive words.

The other problem we were facing with *Tabloid Story* was what constituted a short story. The host editors who said, ‘Yes, give us a supplement,’ expected the traditional short story the literary quarterlies were already catering for. The new writing, with its different idioms, its abandonment of the beginning middle and end linear narrative, its search for new forms and its use of new experiences, they found shapeless, inept, unintelligible, pointless. We didn’t see any point in producing *Tabloid Story* to run old-style stories. We had created it to cater for the new writing. But did the new writing have any audience? Moorhouse began to feel it didn’t and at the end of the year effectively withdrew from the running of the magazine, except to negotiate *The Bulletin* issue at another time of crisis. But before he went, we finally produced two eight page issues at the end of 1973. No. *5* was in *Newswit,* the New South Wales Institute of Technology paper; we were again unhappy about restricting an issue to a paper that appeared on only one campus, but at least this was a readership outside of the university paper scene. And then we phoned Richard Neville on *The Living*

Daylights who seemed interested in doing an issue, sent him down the rejected *Showbusiness* paste-up and it appeared in *The Living Daylights* the next Tuesday as *Tabloid Story* No. 4.

Having got this far it seemed absurd to let the magazine die. So we wrote to the Literature Board with a new proposal – telling them how things were getting bad all over, how the newsprint shortage meant 16 page issues with lots of white space were no longer feasible, how we were losing editors through the nightmare of trying to organize host publications as well as read the manuscripts, and how the only way we could survive was to pay a managing editor. Carmel Kelly, Carl Harrison-Ford and Damien White had at different times all tried being production editors, and Angela Korvisianos and Norma Crinion had helped in editorial and production work. In February 1974 Colin Talbot became Melbourne editor and Pat Woolley became managing editor.

Things began to look up. For six months we had been negotiating with Qantas and finally they came good and ran *Tabloid Story* No. 6 as a 4 page insert in *Q. V.* for May, their giveaway magazine that reached 150,000 passengers. Geoff Wyatt phoned to say that his story had been silently censored by *Q. V. Tabloid Story* No. 7 appeared as a 4 page insert in the *Melbourne Times,* an inner city throwaway; at the last minute they wanted to drop it because of a couple of fucks, but a compromise was reached and the fucks were reduced to f- on the plates. After 150,000 international readers for No. 6 we were again worried about a limited readership for No. 7 and tried for a similar Sydney inner city paper: *The Glebe* was interested in running it until they saw the stories, and so that fell through. No. 7 finally appeared in a second edition in *Honi Soit. Tabloid Story* No. 8 was arranged with Richard Neville's *The Living Daylights,* and at last we were catching up with the backlog of accepted stories, some of which we'd had for 18 months. *The Living Daylights* missed an issue for Easter which we were supposedly in; when we phoned them to check whether we were appearing in the next issue, they said they'd just been told they had closed down. Richard Walsh absorbed *The Living Daylights* into *Nation Review* but refused to take the *Tabloid Story*. *Education,* having rejected us before, took the already pasted up No. 8, and Michael Hourihan, *Education's* editor, was immediately blasted by the Teachers Federation Council for publishing it without consulting them. There was an outcry about obscenity – in particular about Amy Witting's story, which ironically had been a reactionary response to the sexual note of some of the earlier stories. The next two issues of *Education* ran selections from the 200 letters from teachers complaining about the shocking filth etc. of the stories. Eric Willis took the opportunity to denounce Hourihan, the Teachers' Federation, us and the Federal Government in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly; according to the *Sydney Morning Herald* Willis accused the Federal Government of generally subsidising 'anti-establishment and arty-crafty' material aimed at debasing the Australian way of life.

Tabloid Story No. 9 appeared in *The Secondary Teacher* in Victoria; No. 10 appeared in *Semper Floreat* (University of Queensland), *Lot's Wife* and *Arena* (Macquarie University). No. 11 appeared jointly in *New Journalist* and in *Fifth Assembling. New Journalist* was a brave attempt at a radical alternative commentary on the Australian media, run by a collective that included Michael

Symons, Susan Anthony, Viv Kitson, Lindsay Foyle, Peter Manning, Paul Brennan, Malcolm Long, Susan Long, and Keith Windschuttle. *Assembling* was an annual publication from Brooklyn, New York, an assemblage of avant-garde writing produced by the writers themselves without the mediation of editor or publisher. Each writer produced 1,000 copies of his or her piece (roneoed, printed, rubber-stamped, or even handwritten) and *Assembling* collated, bound and distributed. *Assembling's* assemblers, Richard Kostelanetz, Henry Korn and Michael Metz, were worried about *Tabloid Story* having editors, so we decided this issue for them should be one of the editors' own self-selected writing, rather than any edited collection of other people's work – to accord with the *Assembling* policy. Though we stressed that other issues of *Tabloid Story* welcomed contributions from writers everywhere. *Assembling* was our first, and only, issue out of Australia – a stage in *Tabloid Story's* policy of reaching new, wider readerships, and yet a further extension of *Tabloid Story's* packaging experiments. The *Assembling* model was later followed in Australia with *A Package Deal*, put together by Dave Morrissey, Pam Brown, Nigel Roberts and Tim Burns, just as the *Tabloid Story* packaged insert concept was followed by Nigel Roberts and Richard Tipping with *News & Weather*, the regular poetry supplement to *The Living Daylights*. These formal experiments were extended with *The Tabloid Story Pocket Book*, with the stories packaged in pocket book format and library hardback to reach new readerships.

No. 12 appeared in *On Dit* (Adelaide University), and Nos. 13 and 14 in the *Union Recorder* (Sydney University). No. 15 appeared in *The Bulletin*. Brian Kiernan recalls 'the summer of 1974-75 was grim. In the early days we'd been hosted by journals with circulations of over 50,000 which if nothing else had brought in a flood of manuscripts. As acting editor, while the others roved, I became slowly entombed by the mounting walls of paper – fresh manuscripts, manuscripts to be returned, letters from writers whose stories had been accepted but not yet published. Feelers put out to possible new hosts encountered nothing. Even apparently firm agreements appeared to be jinxed. Then at the lowest moment, the editor of *The Bulletin* rang and asked if the editors would be interested in placing an issue and would like to discuss it over lunch at their office. *The Bulletin* and a free lunch! *The Bulletin* had been the vehicle for a generation of writers immediately before and after Federation who had wanted to make it new in terms of their experience and to break through the prevailing conventions – Henry Lawson, Barbara Baynton, Edward Dyson, Steele Rudd... For myself as acting editor, this was an historically symbolic opportunity to present the new fiction of the seventies in the magazine that had carried the new fiction of the nineties. The sense of some symmetry in time, of an appointment with history, was also felt by roving editor Moorhouse, who roved back at this time. Much earlier in his career, Frank had been a copy boy in the *Telegraph* building, and now had satisfaction in recalling those times with senior management and writers over coffee and liqueurs in Sir Frank Packer's private dining room. We ran Murray Bail's 'The Drover's Wife' as the lead story. My accompanying note that *The Bulletin* had published Lawson's story of the same title in 1892 was subbed out; the press missed covering our meeting with history.'

We began our search to find an entirely new group of editors in April 1975. We wanted to ensure the magazine continuation and we also had to maintain continuity in the magazine's current appearance while we were arranging a change-over. No. 16 appeared in Jenny Sheehan's experiment in a raised consciousness suburban throw-away, the *Warringah Woman's Times;* No. 17 appeared in the first issue of the *New Literature Review* (itself incorporating the University of Sydney student magazine *Arna* which had had an interesting literary history over the years). No. 18 appeared in *Newswit* again, and No. 19 in *Tharunka.* Then in November 1975 we handed over to a Melbourne based group of editors, involving at various times Lucy Frost, Meredith Michie, Anne Timlin, John Timlin, Laurie Clancy and Judy Slingsby. From the beginning we had looked for strategies to prevent the magazine becoming too set in one place or with one group of editors. With issue No. 20 there was a complete break so that change could continue; a policy of openness to new fiction, of reaching out to new readers and writers with every issue, of actively seeking new orientations.

Our concern was to publish and promote short fiction and we had to be flexible enough to adapt to continually changing situations. Not restricted to the steady, already committed, literary, dwindling readership of the quarterlies, we encountered different groups of writers and readers with each issue. It was one way, and a major way, of breaking down that old elitism charge that was always being levelled at literary magazines and at the Australia Council. Some amazing material came to *Tabloid Story* because of its movable feast presentation and we were continually discovering new writers who would never normally encounter the conventionally unconventional little magazines or the quarterlies. After each issue a different batch of new contributions arrived. That was exciting and exhilarating, but keeping the magazine going was gruelling. Throughout its life *Tabloid Story* existed in a state of constant change, often seeming close to chaos and collapse. But it was fun while it lasted.

Adventurous Spirits: the University of Queensland Press

The origins of the University of Queensland Press's fiction list must have involved meeting Frank Thompson over a drink or two, in Brisbane or Sydney or both. Memory has tended to blur it into one long continuous drink. It was Peter Edwards, with whom I had worked at Sydney University before he took up the chair of English at Queensland, who introduced my fiction to Frank, UQP's manager. UQP had begun publishing poetry and their Paperback Poetry series was making an impact, certainly among the poets who were nothing if not vocal. So the obvious thing to suggest to Frank was, if there was a Paperback Poetry series, why not a Paperback Prose series?

The argument went something like this. Since poetry was perceived as unprofitable by commercial publishers, a number of academic presses in the United States had begun to publish it in order to preserve the tradition. Wesleyan was the example always cited. But fiction, especially short stories, was also being perceived as non-commercial. Literary fiction was in as vulnerable a situation as poetry, and needed a visionary publisher.

Frank Thompson had a breadth of vision. He was from Los Angeles, and had worked at Michigan University Press and Angus & Robertson before becoming manager of UQP in 1961. He rose to the occasion. He didn't really have to be persuaded. Even as I was arguing the case he had already seen it. What was exciting about working with him in those years was his intuitive response and his adventurous spirit. He could see the need, see the opportunity, and he did it. Of course, it all took a bit longer than that. There were press boards and vice-chancellors and distributors who needed to be given a solid case. But he made it.

For some reason a series was decided on. Those were the days of series. And maybe it was a matter of containment. Anyway, a series was decided on, I sent up my manuscript, and the next thing that happened was I was sent the manuscript of Rodney Hall's *The Ship on the Coin* to report on.

Rodney was one of those poets who were switching to fiction: Bruce Beaver had already tried, and David Malouf, Thomas Shapcott and Roger McDonald soon followed. I took a dim view of this, believing poets should stick to poetry. They tended to turn to fiction with no sense of the constraints and disciplines and traditions of the novel, seemingly writing it off the top of their heads and occasionally doing quite well at it. But even in those days I was shrewd enough to realize that if there was to be a series it needed titles, and if titles were not recommended there would be no series and I would be without a publisher. And so it happened that the first two UQP Paperback Prose volumes were my *Aspects of the Dying Process* and Rodney's *Ship on the Coin.* Though it nearly didn't happen.

Frank Thompson, taking another look at my manuscript, decided it was tricky enough publishing fiction with a university press without being charged for obscenity as well. The climate in

Queensland at the time was less than progressive. He decided to show the manuscript to the vice-chancellor to ensure that he had support before going ahead. I can see why Frank did it, though the consequences annoyed me. The vice-chancellor, Zelman Cowen, took a dim view of the book. Two stories he particularly objected to: 'The Phallic Forest', which Peter Carey back then insisted was the best thing I'd written, and 'The Image of a Sort of Death'. I remember sitting lugubriously with Frank in the University of Sydney club as he, with some obvious anxiety, delivered the message. It was probably the time that the manager came up to me and told me I was no longer a financial member and was not entitled to be there, having been away on study leave and forgotten to renew my subscription. It just added to the general sense of being on the wrong side of the law. The vice-chancellor had been some sort of legal academic.

The message, briefly, was to cut out the offending material from the stories, if I wanted the book to be published. I was outraged, of course. I often was in those days. My deathless prose to be mutilated! It was unthinkable, unacceptable. How could writing still be treated like this in the 1970s? This was the sort of thing that had driven Lawrence into exile. I already was in exile. The whole splendid enterprise seemed to be thwarted before it had even begun. It was one of those long beery evenings with Frank of which I have no clear recollection. Indeed, no recollection at all. He was amazing in that he would always put up with long difficult sessions with his authors. Especially over a drink. In the end he made me see reason. I didn't withdraw the book. Where after all would I have withdrawn it to? Rather than rewrite and amputate and otherwise deface and dismember the two stories, I took them out altogether. The book went ahead. Frank swore me to silence, since he didn't want the series jeopardized by scandalous rumours of interference and compromise. Some years later I mentioned what had happened to Elisabeth Wynhausen and she ran the story in the press. But by then the censorship days were over, for a while.

University of Queensland Press launched the Paperback Prose series at Jim Thorburn's Pocket Bookshop in Sydney in 1972. The writer from *Vogue* couldn't get her mind round it.

'So tell me, is this academic fiction? Are these university novels?'

Brian Kiernan in *The Australian* wrote about the series as a workshop for new fiction. 'It promises to fulfill a valuable role that the underground poetry press and the theatre workshops have already performed for younger poets and playwrights.' I remember finding this particularly fatuous and annoying, and I was provoked to develop the less than positive idea of the sheltered workshop for new fiction in *The Short Story Embassy.* I viewed the UQP titles as fully finished, professional books with real commercial potential, and they didn't need to be put in any condescending apprentice or disability category. 'If there's one word,' said Jake, 'that sums up everything that's gone wrong since the War, it's Workshop,' Kingsley Amis wrote in *Jake's Thing*. Spot on.

It was hard not to feel embattled. A reading was arranged at the University of New South Wales to promote the first two titles. Rodney Hall and I turned up. But there was not one person in

the audience, just the student organizer. She has since gone on to big things. But on this occasion the future didn't look so rosy.

I was not alone in having had my fiction rejected as disgusting and unacceptable. I decided to try to promote some of the new writing under just those labels. I assembled a collection of so-called *Disgusting and Unacceptable Stories* at the invitation of Ron Smith who had left the girlie magazines and was now an editor with the publisher Horwitz. Needless to say they didn't publish it. But when some time later Craig Munro phoned to tell me UQP had a spare subsidy for another title in the Paperback Prose list and ask if I had any suggestions, I sent up the collection. It contained stories by Moorhouse, Vicki Viidikas, myself and Peter Carey. Carey described what happened in an interview in *Vogue Australia,* July 1985 when asked 'How did you first get published?'

'Well, it was through Michael Wilding originally. I'd sent him some stories, and he contacted me saying that he was putting together an anthology, which he outlined to me, and he told me that he wanted some dirty, disgusting stories – it's all a bit weird looking back on it, I'm a bit embarrassed by it – so I did one for him, but he said it was too clean. "Write me another one," he told me, "one that's really off." I thought, "*what!*" but I wrote one; it was the only time I've ever written something with a reason, and it was a story called "Withdrawal".' Interviewer: 'The one where the pig become addicted to heroin.' Carey: 'Right. And I've never really liked that story because I did write it to order. What happened then was that the publisher who was originally going to be something called Open Leaves Press – who I believe were normally publishers of porn – decided that they didn't want to do it. Michael then gave it to University of Queensland Press, who had been about to publish three books, and one of their manuscripts hadn't turned up. They saw my stories and contacted me to ask me if I had any more. I said I did, and that's how *The Fat Man in History* came about.'

Craig, too, decided against publishing the anthology but leapt on the Peter Carey stories with acuity and avidity and ended up securing a volume of them for the series, Peter's first book. And so began Peter's long association with UQP. At that stage he was pretty well unknown. We had been publishing his early work in *Tabloid Story,* where Craig first read him, and I had taken a number of stories for Jon Silkin's UK journal *Stand,* of which I was Australian editor. I thought his stories were marvellous, though the blurb that appeared over my name on his second book, *War Crimes,* was written by Peter himself and read out to me over the phone for my approval late one night. I never felt it caught my idiom, but as Peter disarmingly put it to me once, his skills were not verbal. But he seemed like a talent worth supporting. 'You'll regret it,' said Moorhouse darkly. Peter's stories appeared as *The Fat Man in History,* together with my novel *Living Together* in 1974. In 1975 Murray Bail's *Contemporary Portraits* and my *The West Midland Underground* followed. The reviews of the series were all good, the sales were all good, the series was established.

Writing in Australia in the late 1960s, there were two major problems. First was getting into print, given the paucity and unsatisfactoriness of local publishing and the lack of much connection with the English-language publishing centres of London and New York. The other was getting your

work noticed once it was in print, the problem how to showcase it. Apart from a reputation for cheap red wines, Australia was primarily perceived as a land of sport, a suitable place for the Olympic games. It did not feature largely on the world map of literary attainment. The UQP series Asian and Pacific Writing grew out of a venture I had worked on with Moorhouse that had come to nothing. We had conceived of a southern-hemisphere, English-language literary magazine. We would challenge *Paris Review* and *London Magazine* on their own terms, by producing a world-quality magazine from the south. The models we had in mind were *el corno emplumado*, an avant-garde literary review that came out of Mexico City, and the USA's *New American Review*, that sold as a paperback. We tried various backers without success. But I had done a lot of research on English-language writers and translators in the region. In large part the project had been influenced by a visit I had made to the Philippines in 1966 with Peter King, a friend from the university's Government Department. I encountered a wealth of English-language writing and publishing unknown to readers in Australia, Britain or the US, much of it in Frankie José's Solidaridad bookshop in Manila. Frankie's enthusiasm, lively conversation and range of contacts was a major inspiration.

So when Frank Thompson asked, having settled the Paperback Prose proposal, whether I had any other ideas, I revived and adapted this one. A magazine no longer seemed the best way to run. Magazines were not in UQP's sights at that time. But what about a series of books drawing on contemporary writing in the region – Asia and the Pacific? My argument was that there were amazing and exciting things there. The stories of the Filipino writer Nick Joaquin were every bit as striking and original and magical as the Latin American writings of Borges, Cortazar, Fuentes and Carpentier that were currently in vogue. Here were new and invigorating approaches that would vitalize and cross-fertilize new Australian writing. My focus on all this was that of a writer in Australia – this could be the next avant-garde, the next new wave. My interests were literary not anthropological or political or economic or geographical. These other interests could be served by the series; they would provide an additional market to the ubiquitous and never especially convincing 'general reader'. But they would be a bonus. They were not areas in which I could claim any expertise. It was my basic conviction that there was exciting work coming out of the region that anyone with an interest in contemporary writing would want to read.

The political agenda of seeing Australia as part of Asia had yet to be vocalized. In that regard the series was ahead of its time, and that meant being ahead of the market. I had great visions for the series – international co-publishing and such like. Some of it indeed eventuated. A number of the titles were accepted into the UNESCO translations series. *Modern Japanese Poetry* became an Open University set text in the UK. Kiran Nagarkar was published internationally. Antonio Enriquez won a prize for his volume of stories in the Philippines. *Padma River Boatman* was made into a feature film. Ninotchka Rosca went on to write a biography of Marcos for a publisher in the USA.

Asian and Pacific Writing was always hard to administer, though probably not especially more so than any other publishing list. Translators and editors were endlessly delayed, deadlines had

continually to be revised. There was not much of a tradition of literary translation in Australia, and not much at all from Asian languages. Many of the translations were by people who knew the original languages well but who were not especially literary in orientation themselves – many were anthropologists, academics, political advisers, journalists. Consequently a lot of detailed editorial work on the texts was necessary. Some titles took years to develop. Some projects came to nothing, despite endless correspondence, discussions and meetings.

The first two volumes were a collection of stories by the marvellous Filipino writer, Nick Joaquin, which he called *Tropical Gothic*, and an Indonesian novel, *Atheis* by Achdiat Kata Mihardja, translated by R. J. Maguire, a sub-editor on *The Australian.* The Achdiat novel had come to UQP independently, but was obviously appropriate for the series. Joaquin's stories I had discovered in Frankie José's bookshop. Later we published a volume of Nick Joaquin's plays, *Tropical Baroque*. 'People ask me if you are Michael Wilding the movie star,' Nick wrote to me. 'I tell them no, you are the writer, married to Elizabeth Taylor the novelist.' Yann Lovelock, my poet friend from Oxford with whom I had kept in sporadic touch, had been polishing up a translation by Barbara Palmer of a Bangladeshi novel, Manik Bandopadhyaya's, *Padma River Boatman*, and I took that. UQP wanted the series to have introductions so I approached my colleague at Sydney University, Soumyen Mukherjee, to write one. He recalled seeing the young Bandopadhyaya running around bare-bottomed in rural poverty. The novelist's daughter in due course wrote and complained of this irreverent portrayal of her father.

And this was how the series progressed; some titles I sought out, others came through UQP's own network. Once the series was established and the first titles were published, it attracted material from throughout the region. It made a considerable impact among writers in Asia, and I continue to meet people both there and in Australia who remember it enthusiastically.

One of the virtues of the series was that it was eclectic. Its only agenda was that of finding good writing, and we found it in all sorts of areas. Ulli Beier was a German writer and academic, internationally famous for the work he did developing writing in English in Nigeria. His work there, that of the writers he had encouraged, was widely published, but his later work in Papua New Guinea, where he had moved in the 1970s, was scarcely known. I wrote asking if he would do a book for us, and the resulting *Black Writing from New Guinea* was one of our great successes, and was followed by a second volume. The English poet James Kirkup's translations of contemporary Japanese poets had been appearing in literary journals, notably in Grace Perry's *Poetry Australia,* so I wrote to him for a volume. He was eager to provide the translations, but diffident about writing a contextualizing introduction and suggested finding an academic in the area to cooperate with him. A. R. ('Bertie') Davis was professor of Chinese and Japanese at the University of Sydney. He had edited a comparable volume of modern Chinese poetry for Penguin, working with the translators. He undertook the Kirkup collaboration with vigour and enthusiasm, immersing himself in contemporary Japanese poetry and engaging in a massive editorial and research project. It took a long time but the

resulting volume was well worth it. Bonnie McDougall's splendid anthology of the work of the Chinese writer Ho Ch'i-fang was based on a doctoral thesis she had recently completed in Bertie's department. The daughter of communist parents, she had been sent to school in China in her early teens. It was not an experience she enjoyed, and on her return to Sydney she hung out with the Libertarians down at the Newcastle, which was where I first met her. Later she became a professor of Chinese in Oslo and Edinburgh. She also offered me a new translation of *Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art*, based on the original text. I was eager to publish it but sadly Frank drew the line at this as inappropriate, too political, and it appeared elsewhere.

Harry Aveling sent in a volume of *Contemporary Indonesian Poetry* and a collection of stories by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Pramoedya had been in gaol in Indonesia for years as a political prisoner. His case was hardly known in the West at that time. We published one of the stories in *Tabloid Story* and Moorhouse and I wrote a letter to *The Australian* about his imprisonment. Harry's translations marked the beginning of the public recognition of Pramoedya's situation. Later, after the series had closed down, Penguin published a trilogy of Pramoedya's novels in a translation by Max Lane. Another lively Indonesian writer we published was W. S. Rendra: Harry translated some of his poems for the *Contemporary Indonesian Poetry* volume, and Max Lane translated his play, *The Struggle of the Naga Tribe,* for the series. Harry Aveling was a prolific and enthusiastic translator from Indonesian and Malay. I suggested he should join me as co-editor of the series and he readily agreed. From then on we shared the load of reading the manuscripts that came in, and searching out new titles. At some point Harry became a follower of Rajnish, changed his name to Aridas Anand, and started wearing orange robes. We had one editorial lunch at a Brisbane restaurant, but after Harry's arrival in resplendent saffron I think Frank Thompson decided never to take us out in public again. He could disregard the name change, refuse to put it in the books and still write to Aridas as Harry, but he couldn't ignore the yellow robes across the table unless he closed his eyes or kept them fixed on a jar of amber fluid. He chose the latter, but was still anguished.

The series ran for ten years and twenty volumes. The problems came when UQP decided to cut back to one title a year. I felt it wasn't enough to maintain the presence of the series. Worse, it meant either building up a lengthy backlog of titles waiting to appear, or rejecting manuscripts that were appealing but that would have had to wait two, three, four years for publication. The amount of reading for the series was becoming huge and with only one title a year, frustrating. Overloaded with other commitments – by now I was running my own press with my partnership in Wild & Woolley – I regretfully resigned from the series. Frank left UQP not long afterwards, and in the subsequent reorganizing the series was closed down. But it was marvellous while it lasted. I would do it again. Once in a while I meet Harry in Singapore or Canberra or somewhere and we talk about reviving it. But we have never found another visionary publisher like Frank Thompson to back us.

They were exciting years in Australian publishing, the early seventies. Much of the writing had been done in the bottled-up years of the late sixties. I am not sure that the so-called Whitlam

years were that creative. Certainly, the increased Australia Council funding and the more liberal climate meant things appeared that could not appear earlier. But even here the policies were ambiguous. Consistently the Literature Board refused to do anything about distribution. At a point when independent distributors were being absorbed by transnational publishers and when new small and independent presses could find no access to efficient distribution, the Literature Board did nothing. Publication subsidies were dispensed, publicity money splashed around, but a national distribution policy for all that funded writing was never drawn up. The Literature Board also always insisted on giving money readily to transnational publishers. In this as in so much else Australian governmental policy seemed to be in the pockets of the transnationals rather than trying to confront or mitigate their destructive effects.

UQP established itself valiantly in this hostile commercial climate. When it began its literary and Asian lists, it was perceived as a marginal, eccentric organization. How could you have a publisher in Brisbane, when publishers were all in Melbourne? But UQP showed the way. Soon its literary list began to take the centre ground, and small presses like Wild & Woolley and Outback set up as publishers of the alternative and the avant-garde. There was room for all of us, though I felt that Frank always looked somewhat askance at my involvement with Wild & Woolley. But we never saw ourselves in opposition or competition. The reality was that there was all this exciting new Australian writing, and only UQP and the small presses were publishing it.

And even if distribution was a nightmare and sales a problem, the media responded. The media recognition of new writing, the way it welcomed the new initiatives, showed that there was an interest in what was being done, that readers wanted to know about the material, even wanted to buy it. Effectively the transnationals were shamed into having to publish Australian writing, easier as it would been just to keep on importing the overseas product and monopolizing distribution channels. But it was only after UQP and the small presses showed the way that the transnationals developed their local literary lists in the 1980s. And that development was not in response to specifically Australian conditions, needless to say. They were doing the same in Canada, New Zealand, and India, keeping the natives quiet, making it look like they were giving writers access to international markets, but in effect just providing a local reservation. But that is to move to the unsatisfactory decade, the eighties. I prefer to end with remembering those happy days in the seventies, sitting in the twilight on the verandah of the University of Queensland staff club at St Lucia, cane toads hopping around at my feet, clambering up my legs, the endless flights of flying foxes slowly flapping down the Brisbane River. Those were magical times. Frank's personal life by then was achieving a complexity of a rather Gothic or Baroque or Rococo flamboyance, one of those terms, anyway. But this was the seventies and that was what personal lives were all about in the seventies, it seemed. And not only the seventies. We would commiserate on the way in which things seemed to be lurching out of control and have another drink and watch another thousand flying foxes waft slowly past, and it seemed like it would all go on for ever.

How Creative Writing Came to the University of Sydney

Creative writing courses originated nearly a century ago in American universities, when students were found to be good at talking but poor in their written work. Creative writing was one of the remedial, compulsory literacy courses introduced. From such modest, utilitarian beginnings emerged a vast celebrity industry. Most of the major American writers and many more minor ones now survive, not on their royalties, but by teaching writing. Some of the programs developed considerable prestige. But most are of a more humble nature. Creative writing is a variant of essay writing or legal writing or business English: a way of developing literate expression. Once you recognise that you are not in the business of producing literary geniuses, the whole project becomes less daunting. I suspect that literary geniuses produce themselves, anyway. But the provision of creative writing courses in the syllabus at least provide the recognition of writing as something worthwhile.

John Sullivan, whom I had first met when he fined me £2 at college, had left Oxford for the United States and by the mid-1980s was at the University of California at Santa Barbara. He invited me to teach creative writing there. I had no idea of how to go about it. I had my own experience of writing novels and stories. But how was that to be translated into teaching practice? As soon as I arrived I tentatively asked some of the staff there how they did it.

'Oh, we were hoping you would be able to tell us,' said Edgar Bowers.

He was a poet whose most recent collection was called *Living Together*, the title of my first novel. I think we both viewed each other with some suspicion about this coincidence. But he did offer me one piece of advice.

'I tell them they can write anything they like, as long as it's not science fiction or about death.'

But the best practical advice I ever had came later from the novelist Malcolm Bradbury, who set up the first university course in Britain at the University of East Anglia in 1971.

‘The secret of creative writing courses,’ he told me, ‘is just select the good students for admission. The ones who already know how to write. They teach themselves.’

When I returned from Santa Barbara to Sydney it was to find yet another of my literature courses, the political novel, or utopias and anti-utopias, or modern American fiction, had been dropped from the syllabus. 'Rested' as my solicitous colleagues put it. It was always risky taking leave, which was why some people never did. The prospect of a dozen first year tutorials loomed menacingly. Either that, or I would have rapidly to devise and prepare a totally new course from scratch on a topic that would be acceptable in the new world order. I had to teach something.

I was ambivalent about offering creative writing. I still wasn't sure that it could be done. Could you produce writers that way? But there again, did you produce literary critics by teaching literature courses?

When I was an undergraduate, continuous assessment had not been introduced. I wrote my weekly

essay and read it to my tutor, and that was it. It was never formally marked. There were no examinations after the second term until finals at the end of the third year. This meant that you could allocate your time as you wished. This was a marvellous opportunity for a young would-be writer. If you wanted to take a term off to edit the student paper or produce a play or write a novel, you could. I did. Then you worked hard to catch up. When I arrived at Sydney University it had examinations at the end of each year, but through the sixties and seventies it still had a civilized programme of three ten week terms and three vacations a year, which allowed some leisure for students to develop their creative gifts.

But the introduction of continuous assessment after every course turned university into a conveyer belt, with no time available for students to write poetry or stories or plays or student journalism. And with the reduction of scholarships and re-introduction of fees, students were having to take jobs to support themselves. They no longer had the spare time that university used to give them, in which they could write. With the introduction of a creative writing course aspiring writers would at least be given the opportunity to write at a crucial stage in their development. It was in order to provide this space in the timetable for young writers to write that I decided that introducing a creative writing course might be a positive thing.

And importantly, it would be taught as part of a traditional English Literature syllabus. I could have some confidence that my students would have some acquaintance with good writing. In their other English courses they hopefully encountered the basics of the literary tradition. As English syllabuses are eroded this, of course, is becoming problematical. More worrying still is the way that many creative writing programs that have since developed are in Communications or Media or Creative Arts, not English literature. This means that the students are likely to have little or no acquaintance with literature. They are missing the essential context of the experience of widespread reading.

Creative writing was not deemed respectable or serious by traditional academics in Australia, and writers were not much appreciated. There was a Christopher Brennan building at the University of Sydney, named after the poet, standing adjacent to the building named after Mungo MacCallum, a former professor of English who wrote a critical study of Shakespeare's Roman plays and who was later the Vice-Chancellor responsible for dismissing Brennan from the university. You did not need much imagination to see the fissures where the two buildings were drawing apart.

For years when I filled in the staff publications report at the end of each year, I omitted the short stories I had published. Later, getting bold, I began to include them, but the head of department always excluded them for me, and they were never listed. I remember Robert Bly visiting the English department common room and strumming an accompaniment on the banjo to one of his poems. One by one all those lecturers in language and literature abandoned their afternoon tea-cups and crept out. Nor did they take up the Celtic Studies invitation to have dinner with Seamus Heaney, which was how I was able to get Adamson along to fill one of the empty places – something that led to a lifelong

friendship between Adamson and Heaney.

But the respectable and the serious were gradually being excised from the university, anyway. Rather than retreat into despair and endless lamentations about the degradation of the age, I decided to take advantage of the general collapse of tradition. And so I proposed a creative writing course. To make it seem more attractive to the new times I suggested we could make it a fee-paying course.

'But who would get the money?' the Professor of English, G. A. Wilkes, responded.

End of conversation. A valid point, of course. Any money the department earned seemed to get clawed back automatically by central administration.

One of the advantages of old institutions is that their Byzantine structures and accumulated *ad hoc* arrangements mean that, if you cannot get something done one way, there are always other ways. The English department was composed of three separate fiefdoms. If English Literature did not want creative writing, there was always Australian Literature or Early English Language and Literature.

I had dropped by the Department early one hot summer morning to pick up my mail, unshaven, bare-footed, unpressed, unironed. Inevitably when in such casual mode and planning a swift return home, I encountered Dame Leonie Kramer, Professor of Australian Literature, in the corridor. Dame Leonie could be forbidding.

For a number of years I had been following the strategy of always proposing or demanding something

whenever I encountered a professor or head of department. That way they tended to duck when they saw you coming and leave you alone. Otherwise they would get in first with some extra marking or a couple of extra classes. If ever there was an occasion for this strategy, it was now. Divert attention from the stubbled jaw and stubbed toes.

The Department was re-structuring. In those years it was always re-structuring, probably still is. Every time we got a new structure in place we deconstructed it. It was a way of demoralizing and degrading the humanities. And it worked. This particular year Australian Literature had to be re-packaged and we needed a new ninety-minute or two-hour course, whatever module was currently in mode. Tentatively I suggested creative writing might be a possibility.

Professor Dame Leonie Kramer stood in the corridor and examined my unshaven, sockless, shoeless self. I felt like Bertie Wooster in the presence of an aunt.

'If it had been anyone else but you, Michael,' she said.

Was that a yes, or a no?

And so the first Australian university undergraduate course in creative writing was established. A number of Institutes and Colleges of Advanced Education soon to achieve university status, and possibly Wollongong University, already taught writing, but none of the older, traditional universities. Establishing this at Sydney was a breakthrough. The news spread rapidly and I had calls from Adelaide, Melbourne, Perth and Hong Kong asking for advice on how to get such a course approved. I told them, as best I could, and they soon followed suit.

And graduate courses? I had not planned anything. But suddenly I perceived the great need for them. It was another corridor meeting with Dame Leonie. She told me that Janette Turner Hospital was coming as writer-in-residence and wanted to teach creative writing. I could see my carefully constructed plan disintegrate. Janette would be taking the course and I would be doing those twelve first year tutorials after all unless I came up with a new scheme.

'She would prefer graduate students,' said Dame Leonie.

Graduate students, I reflected. I could see little prospect of getting an honours Master of Arts programme in creative writing approved by the department and faculty in time, if ever. Let alone a doctorate. But the department also ran a course-work programme for a pass M.A. In the past it had largely been used by schoolteachers upgrading their qualifications, taking courses that often made a point of duplicating Higher School Certificate texts. Now that the HSC had fewer literary texts, and now that teachers do a Bachelor of Education rather than a Bachelor of Arts degree, its enrolments had been declining. It was a comparatively uncontentious place to offer a course. It had a catchment of students already enrolled. It was taught in the evenings, something most people were not eager to do. But evening courses would leave me the mornings free to write.

The Sydney Institute of Technology had just announced it would be offering the first Australian graduate course in creative writing next year. If we put a creative writing component into our pass M.A. for second semester, we could start the first Australian M.A. writing course this year and we could beat them.

'Let's beat them,' said Dame Leonie.

So we did.

Writing Humour

'They laughed when I said I was going to be a comedian . . . they're not laughing now.'
- Bob Monkhouse

For a while as a child I wanted to be a radio comedian. But in those days comedians had their four or five minutes of fame and then they sang a song to end their set. And that was the impossibility. I would happily tell jokes. But standing up and singing, that was unthinkable. I had had to do it in primary school and found it terrifying, blushing and croaking in front of a knowing, derisive class. No way could I sing a song in public, not even to be a comedian. So that left the possibility of reading the news. You didn't have to sing a song to end the news. Not in those days. The delivery had to be a bit more deadpan than that of most comedians, but the material had its risible side. But I don't think I thought that then. Or did I always think that? Was that the origin of my later conflation of comedy and political themes? Whatever, recognizing the lack of openings for a seven year old newsreader, I turned to writing fiction.

Though that was a while later. I was eighteen when I wrote the first story that I sold commercially. A coffee bar had opened up in Worcester, something new and cosmopolitan and exotic. We flocked to it. The waitresses were entrancing, or one of them was. As I remember it, we went for coffee in pursuit of the waitress and ended up being lured into ordering a meal we could ill afford, and the waitress was off duty. Sexual fantasy, financial catastrophe, humiliation and embarrassment: potent sources for fiction. I exorcised the embarrassment by treating the episode with humour and recouped the financial loss by selling the piece to the BBC's 'Morning Story' and having my humiliation broadcast nationally. I never got to hear it because I was working as a bread-roundsman for the Co-operative Wholesale Society at the time and in those days delivery vehicles were not fitted with radios. The vans we drove were powered by electric motors, and sometimes the batteries ran out before we got back to the depot. There was no way they could have powered a radio as well. And I could not afford a portable transistor. All I heard was the closing announcement at someone's back door and the typescript has now been lost.

It wasn't, however, the first piece of writing I sold commercially. Five months earlier I had begun writing for the local paper *Berrow's Worcester Journal,* on the literary associations of the region I lived in. My very first article was called 'Miserrimus', most unhappy man, the inscription on a gravestone in Worcester Cathedral, celebrated in a poem by Wordsworth. Not at all humorous in content, though it appeared auspiciously on April Fool's day, 1960. Often, as I hung onto my day job in the ensuing years, I reflected on the significance of such a start to a literary career.

My first volume of fiction was not especially humorous, either, as its title, *Aspects of the Dying Process*, indicates. It was published towards the end of the era of portentously lugubrious titles.

I made a dialectical reversal for my next book, a determined bid for the positive, and called it *Living Together.* It was a novel in the tradition of the comedy of embarrassment. I suspect this is more of an English tradition than Australian or European or American. The English are much better at it, both at feeling embarrassment and at inducing it in others. Indeed, it is so much a part of the English way of life that I was not consciously aware of it as a theme while writing the book. My focus was on the replication of parent-children relationships by supposed adults. My experience of parental intrusion was still vivid, and I had observed it in house-sharing situations in which I had participated. A part of myself was there in both the parentally oppressive Martin and the filially oppressed Paul.

Relationships of power, of dominance and submission, are always open to a comic interpretation. It is one way of defusing the brutality of the oppression, which is always there. There are elements of cruelty in this sort of comedy that have their distasteful aspect. I had already explored them in a long story, 'Hector and Freddie' which I wrote in the mid 1960s about two Oxford contemporaries. The original of Hector went on to become a quite well-known journalist, and speech-writer to the royal family. Brian Kiernan has indicated in *Running Wild*, the festschrift which he edited with David Brooks, how the thematic structure of 'dominant and recessive male personalities who compete in many of the earlier stories' recurs through my fiction. And in 'Stories of Things Happening' in the same volume Bruce Clunies Ross has indicated some of the sources of this theme in *Living Together*.

Frank Kermode wrote to me that *Living Together* was the funniest book he had read since Kingsley Amis's *Girl, 20*. But at that point in time I no longer read Amis and was yet to rediscover him. I felt that it belonged to a passing era. Formally it was structured and patterned, and by the mid-seventies I was abandoning the influence of Henry James for the more open-ended spontaneity of Jack Kerouac, Leonard Cohen, Richard Brautigan. *The Short Story Embassy* was the breakthrough. When Robert Duncan described James as the first of the moderns to me I felt much relieved; I could bring dear old HJ out from the closet again. I could admit that the *The Short Story Embassy*, which commentators linked with Brautigan (and fair enough), took its first paragraph direct from *The Turn of the Screw*.

There are other continuities. There was still the comedy of embarrassment in the sufferings of Laszlo and Tichborne. There was still the pattern of dominance and submission. But the theme I now began to pursue was the comedy of paranoia. Laszlo's tortured imaginings are in part a serious exploration of sexual jealousy: but they are also the basis for the comedy of over-interpretation, of the excess of the paranoid imagination.

Again, there was a powerful tradition on which to draw. As William Burroughs remarked somewhere of paranoia, 'when you know that you know all the news.' Its material base is undoubtedly to be found in the very fabric of our social order; but it requires an awareness of the truth, or the lies, of the social order to perceive it. The British, with their self-satisfaction in the British way of life, freedom, parliamentary democracy, justice, all the great sonorities, are exceptionally blinkered, and

Australia in this remains in the British tradition. Europeans, with their centuries of experience of undisguisedly authoritarian regimes, are much more open to admitting the existence of controls and conspiracies into their world view: these are part of the fundamental vision of Stendhal, Balzac, and Conrad. American writers are similarly more attuned to a vision of conspiracy, seeing the social order as based on hidden forces and dark manipulations: I think especially of Norman Mailer, Don de Lillo, Robert Stone and Burroughs.

It is a well-established tradition. But I suspect it was the widespread use of drugs in the 1960s and 1970s, especially cannabis, that revived paranoia as a way of seeing the social order. For the nineteenth century, cannabis was thought of as 'the drug of travel.' Hashish, taken in quite considerable doses, offered psychedelic visions of other realms. It was also known for producing what was referred to as 'the dual vision,' a sense of being oneself and also standing beside oneself. Both of these experiences can be found in Marcus Clarke's stories. But it is the drug's capacity for making new connections, for revealing over-reaching patterns and exposing hidden conspiracies, that appealed to mid and late twentieth century writers. And insofar as these connections could be excessive, the imaginative leaps often as absurd as revelatory, then it provided the possibilities of humour. It is quite often a dead-pan humour. It was not until I heard a recording of William Burroughs reading from his work that I could catch onto his sardonic wit. And it is a humour that is often self-deprecating, that often cancels itself out.

In *The Short Story Embassy*, like *Living Together*, the focus is on personal relationships. The comedy arises from the appalling exercise of power. But through the 1970s I had been trying to imbue my writing with a stronger political content. The tradition of the Anglo-Saxon novel, and of its associated literary criticism, had been to exclude the political. In the universities this had pretty well been achieved – in the critical methodology and in the selection of the canon. But there was a strong countervailing movement through the 1960s and 1970s, and I drew what I could from that. In the lectures and seminars I was teaching on the novel, I began to focus on political themes, drawing on the material for articles, and collecting them into a couple of books, *Political Fictions* and *Social Visions*.

In *Pacific Highway* I made an attempt to deal with political issues, and after that I wrote the politically committed *The Paraguayan Experiment*. Humour was not a feature. But there are precedents for politically engaged comedy and I tried to learn from them in my later fiction. Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk* brilliantly captures the comedy of survival within an authoritarian society, the transparent police informer in every café, the petty abuses of power, the ruses of evasion. Even Henry Lawson's 'The Loaded Dog', a masterpiece of comedy, carries its political freight. The good dog is coloured the red and black of the anarchists when it bears its terrorist bomb, and at the story's triumphant, positive end is shown 'smiling his broadest, longest and reddest smile of amiability,' the red of revolutionary socialism; whereas the bad dog is coloured the yellow of a yellow dog contract, a non-union contract. The phrase is no longer current in Australia, but survives in the

USA, from Blues' lyrics, like W. C. Handy's 'Yellow Dog Blues', to Ross Thomas's political thriller, *Yellow-Dog Contract*.

In 1978 I received a fellowship from the literature board of the Australia Council and revisited England and the United States. England brought back memories of childhood. California fuelled me with a new enthusiasm for an alternative view of the public world. Conspiracy theories were rife there. And not just conspiracies but all the other weirdnesses of the end of the seventies, like UFOs and predictions of apocalypse. The themes were extreme and exciting and they made great plots; and plots were what the etiolated English novel had for too long been lacking. Back in Balmain I wrote ‘Reading the Signs’ drawing on the experiences of these two worlds. It meant a return to a past period but this was not in intention a nostalgic evasion of the present. Rather, those concerns that were seen as distinctively contemporary, indeed Californian, in contrast to that Midlands past, were rediscovered as having always inhabited that past. Like the UFO my parents saw. It began a project of rediscovering what had been forgotten or ignored or repressed. Much of what was distinctively contemporary then has now become the mark of a particular historical moment itself. But the other issues that the story recalls, the experience of class society, remain persistently present and have refused to be relegated to history.

I was beginning to look at political and social issues through conspiracy theories. I rehearsed them endlessly in the Indian summer of the late 1970s. Geoff Gold suggested I write them in a column for *Nation Review*, which he had just bought from Gordon Barton. In keeping with the apocalyptic mood of the times, I wanted to call the column 'Last Days.' But Don'o Kim told me that that was the title of a novel he was writing, and begged me not to use it. I surrendered it to him. As it happened, apocalypse was deferred yet once more, and so was Kim's novel. A quarter of a century passed and the new millennium dawned before he finished it in 2003, and by then he had decided to call it something else. So it was that *Nation Review* came up with its own title for the column: 'Wilding's Paranoia,' and the damage was done. I was labelled.

It was a light-hearted column. The excitement of making connections, of drawing parallels, was the stimulus. The comedy of over-interpretation, the outrageousness of the plots, provided the edge. Unfortunately, one by one the extreme speculations proved to be true. I would imagine the most extreme conspiracies I could think of, and over the years they were pretty well all revealed as reality. Or as what passes for reality in the political world. This was not a matter of comedy any more.

'We have a machine on the phone that flashes a red light if the line is being tapped,' Geoff Gold phoned me up to tell me. 'And it's flashing now.'

I gave up the column, *Nation Review* died, but, to quote dear old Henry James again, things would never be again as they were. And all for the sake of those magnificent articles, as Marcus Clarke once reflected. The material, the world view, the consciousness, fed into my fiction in the ensuing decades, creating the edgy comedy of paranoia and conspiracy. From a concern with social justice and a preoccupation with class discriminations, colonial oppressions and economic

exploitation, I had slid into explorations of the slippery world of control and surveillance and the suppression of dissidence, the fringes of the secret state.

It is tricky writing about humor, particularly your own. You run the continual risk of a stony-faced reception, the glazed look, of an absolute lack of response. Often the things I found funny to write have not been perceived as at all comic. Often in the process of writing the humor lies in the language, in the allusions, in the verbal excess, in the play of the written against the unwritten. I found 'The Phallic Forest' comic in the excess of its imagery. I found 'Beach Report' comic in the narrator's bland acceptance of appalling authoritarian conformity, in the eager search for any sign to follow. Not everything I wrote was imbued with the political. The comic horror of 'This is For You' was purely personal, based on a gift Minas Poulos had received from Anna Couani; bad behaviour with Bob Adamson provided the humor and horror of 'I am Monarch of All I Survey,' and 'The Imagination;' 'The Beauties of Sydney' recalled an episode that could have been tragic but remained in the realms of slap-stick, when Sue Gregory and I took the visiting English poet Jon Silkin up to go sailing on Pittwater with Rudi Krausmann, and the dinghy carrying Rudi and Silkin sank before reaching the yacht.

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There will always be a future for comedy. No matter how bad things become, comedy will continue provide a positive note. I hope. But who will publish it? As I reflected on the grim state of publishing, I began to formulate a black comedy about the world of writing.

'Film's about film, Michael, you know that,' Pete Theobald had told me at Oxford. It was kind of him to concede my knowledge, but I didn't know that. I used to think that films were, like novels, about social reality, about the illusory real world. But Pete, who was adept with the hand-held camera - these were the days of Godard and Truffaut, when we were still learning to call films movies - had introduced me to the world of post-modernism. Way, way before we knew it was called that.

If film was about film, then writing was about writing. Self-referentialism, we learned to call it. Narcissism, the unfriendly conservatives would snarl. Though they should have embraced the concept, and indeed they soon did as it became the favoured aesthetic of modern times. Self-referentialism was the ideal opposition to realism, from their point of view. Keep out any troubling social observation, any political critique, any commitment or engagement - to employ a couple of terms then fast fading from the acceptable agenda of artistic production.

I have written quite a lot about writing. *The Short Story Embassy* proclaimed its literary nature in its very title. Vicki Viidikas appears again, this time as Nada, in *National Treasure* which is about the world of books as was the previous novel, *Wild Amazement*. And yes, *Wild Amazement* was a companion to the earlier *Wildest Dreams*, which was also a book about books, a novel about a novelist. But there is a difference. History repeats itself, as one of the great grand narrators of the past put it, first time tragedy, second time farce.

I had written enough tragedy about writing. 'You must be a very unhappy man,' Bob Ellis said to

me after reading *Wildest Dreams*. I hadn't thought of it like that. I had simply tried to chart the age-old story of literary hopes and resistant reality, a modern *Lost Illusions*. As long as the literary world was there, and there were some kindred spirits around to have a long literary lunch with, I felt quite happy. Although there were signs that things were changing. Originally I called the book *The Literary Pages* and it had run as a pre-publication serial in Lawrence Gibbons' street paper, the *Sydney City Hub*, week by week as 'The Literary Page'. But Laurie Muller, Frank Thompson's successor at University of Queensland Press, refused to allow it. 'The word literature on the cover of a book is the kiss of death,' he insisted. What a brave, new world we were entering.

I didn't want to write another sad story. I didn't want people going around thinking I was sad. 'Always smile when you go into university,' Stephen Knight advised me; 'it makes them anxious to think you're happy.'

I decided to write a comedy, indeed, a farce. The germ, the idea, of *National Treasure* came to me at one of those spirit-raising literary lunches. It was a birthday celebration for my colleague Brian Kiernan. Brian had written the biography of David Williamson. David was one of those present and at some point he began telling the story of a writer he knew who was using a research assistant.

The universities are notorious for the research assistant racket. The aesthete Villiers de l'Isle-Adam famously remarked, 'As for living, our servants will do that for us.' Academics rapidly adapted his *aperçu*: as for writing, our research assistants will do that for us. In *National Treasure* the novelist protagonist Scobie Spruce is assured by the poet Prickett, 'Politicians don't write their own speeches. Academics don't write their own articles. Why should novelists write their own novels or poets their own poems? The best ones don't, not the successful ones.'

Having seen the comic potential of the novelist who doesn't write his own novels, I began to consider other flagrant inauthenticities of the literary world. The world that could no longer be called literary. Plagiarism was an obvious theme. Lots of precedents for that. Then there was the practice of providing handwritten original manuscripts to order for the rare-book trade and institutional library collections. More than one writer has told me about how they've copied out the odd poem or novel for that market. And there were other atrocities, like the book launch with no beer (or wine or spirits) I once went to; a high profile media event, but distinctly unAustralian, I felt. Once I'd started, all the dodgy stories of the writing scene flooded before my eyes.

The characters are all fictional, as the disclaimer at the front of every novel assures suspicious readers. But many of the events have their archetypal reality. There was the shameful awards night dinner where Morris West got shouted down in his speech and bread rolls shot round the room like rockets in a modern war zone. And it was Allen Ginsberg who regularly stripped naked at readings when challenged about the truth. 'I'll show you the naked truth.' Scobie Spruce's disastrous public appearance draws on these events.

Yet reality always outstrips fiction. As a culminating episode, Scobie discovers what he claims is his aboriginality. Wise career move, as someone cruelly remarked of Jack Kerouac's early death. The

novel was written and well into production when Les Murray announced to the press that he was thinking of having a DNA test to discover whether he had aboriginal ancestry. No, Les, I was not alluding to you, truly.

The common reader scanning over these reflections might wonder about the propriety of the novelist writing about his own novels. Indeed, I wonder myself. Is this not going beyond self-referentialism and into the world of self-promotion? It probably is. But is there are any difference in this age of self-advertisement? After all, writing about how I wrote my novel has now become a genre of its own, a way of getting space in the weekend papers to publicize your latest book. Well, nothing wrong with that. Nice work if you can get it. And a practical application of all that literary criticism I practised for so long, after all.

Writing My Campus Novel

It was Elsie Duncan-Jones, a colleague of mine when I taught at the University of Birmingham, who once said to me, 'Dear Michael, I do wish you would write your campus farce, rather than living it all the time.' In the end I did. I first tried writing a novel set in England in the 1970s. I tried to draw on my experience of the ferment in the universities at that time to write a novel drawing on some of the politics; but somehow I could not bring the political into focus. I couldn't get the narrative plot to gell. It was set in the time of student protests and security services' infiltration, but though I attended some of the sit-ins, I didn't know enough about the covert side of the university to get a convincing

narrative. I salvaged the character studies and cut it down to a 12,000 word novella, which I called, nonetheless, 'Campus Novel.' Professor Edmonds is based on Terence Spenser who was professor of English and director of the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham. Colleagues used to say, surreptitiously and dismissively, that he was mentioned in a novel by Olivia Manning. When I came to read *The Balkan Trilogy* I found that he was not just mentioned, but was one of the three main characters, Clarence. So much for the love and respect of your academic colleagues. I had not read the novel at the time I came to write about him, but knowing it had been written gave me a sense of participating in that parallel universe of fictional existence. And I have been told that 'Campus Novel' encouraged, if not incited, the pseudonymous Charles Cutting to write *The Surleighwick Factor,* which also owes its origins to the University of Birmingham.

Friends continued to suggested that I write a campus novel. A novel about the university in the abstract and about the University of Sydney in particular. Ted Wheelwright, the economist and thorn in the side of Sydney's establishment was particularly pressing, offering some juicy scandals. But even in those heady days I retained some instinct of self-preservation. It had not seemed a terribly good idea while still working in the system. Once I could see early retirement beckoning, however, what was there to stop me? Very little.

I am not sure that there is any clear-cut set of conventions for the novel of university life. *Lucky Jim* is a splendid and justly famous *fons origens*, but much of its humour owed more to the tradition of country house comedy, epitomized in the work of P. G. Wodehouse, than to the dynamics of the university. Even the egregious Professor Welch was essentially based on Amis' father-in-law, not on a representative, or even eccentric, academic. It was a way of relieving tension, of letting off steam, he wrote. The alternative was to stick a knife beneath the father-in-law's fifth rib. Amis's later *Luke's Thing* deals with the post-Lawrentian sex-war as much as the Oxford environment in which it is partially set. C. P. Snow's novels of power and influence touch on Cambridge for a couple of volumes, and Willa Cather's early masterpiece, *The Professor's House* has some insightful things to say about the American campus. Bernard Malamud's *A New Life* is a uniquely bleak portrayal, and amongst other North American contributions to the genre that I had read are works by Randall Jarrell, Howard Nemerov, and Joyce Carol Oates. In Australia Don Aitken, Robert Barnard, Laurie Clancy, Ross Fitzgerald, Thomas Keneally, Hugh Mason, and David Myers are amongst those whose fiction has dealt with universities. Malcolm Bradbury's *Stepping Westward* and David Lodge's *Changing Places* are novels of the visiting professor sub-genre, the Englishman in America with Bradbury, and the dual view of Englishman in America and American in England in Lodge. Their later novels, Bradbury's *The History Man* and Lodge's *Small World,* achieved considerable exposure when dramatized for television. This is when the genre became ideological and political. Whatever their intentions in writing their novels, Lodge and Bradbury found themselves conscripted to the emergent project of undermining public support for the university in the Thatcher years.

'If that's the way they carry on there, the universities don't deserve any money,' my mother

remarked to me, one time I was back in England on leave.

The discrediting of the university, and in particular the humanities, softened up the public for the degradation of the British university system. Australia obediently followed suit.

In writing a campus novel you were necessarily aware of such influential predecessors. I never met Amis, though at the Faber launch of a *festschrift* for Philip Larkin I saw him across the room, ferociously red-faced, a leg encased in plaster from a fall at the Garrick Club. I was too intimidated to approach him. I taught with David Lodge at the University of Birmingham in the late 1960s and kept in touch with him over the years; he generously supplied a blurb for *Academia Nuts*. I also came to know Malcolm Bradbury. Their works had established a certain campus novel ambience, but that apart, I wasn't aware of consciously drawing on them. It was more a case of having to define your own different vision. Most of these writers were too uniquely themselves to serve as a model. I was probably more influenced by Wodehouse and Evelyn Waugh, who did not deal specifically with the university, but whose comic mastery had also been an inspiration to Amis, Lodge and Bradbury.

Campus farce, as Elsie Duncan-Jones characterized it, had established itself as one way of writing about universities. Bold, broad comedy, extreme situations, the comedy of excess and exaggeration. Either farce or a murder story. Despite all the provocations and irritations of academic life, I felt uneasy about murder. So farce it had to be. For a while, anyway. So *Academia Nuts* has its generic farcical note.

But plot was a problem. Plot and narrative. University life had lots of little plots but no grand narrative that I could discern. Well, I told myself, having endlessly been told it by others, the days of the grand narratives are over. I didn't believe it, but it was a useful idea to hold on to in the current circumstances. Maybe rather than a narrative novel I could write something more episodic. It would be truer to my experience of university life. Lots of minor skirmishes. Guerrilla warfare episodes – or terrorist and insurgent incidents as the politicians and media seem to call them now – rather than long drawn campaigns.

One of the things I shared with Professor Dame Leonie Kramer, my colleague at the University of Sydney, was an enjoyment of English television comedies. I wondered if they might offer a structural archetype I could access. In the past writers had drawn on the Bible and Homeric epics to underpin their fictions. And now I was considering Jimmy Perry and David Croft's *Are You Being Served?* as a model. A failing department store certainly had the same sort of feel to it as the contemporary university, both moribund and mercantile. And the seedy, sex-preoccupied tradition of English theatrical comedy, from pantomime and music hall to the *Carry On* movies, was not unsuitable for a treatment of the groves of academe. Inevitably *Academia Nuts* touched on this politically-incorrect sex comedy and *double entendre* that has been a no less generic feature of campus novels.

But the model I found most useful for my purposes was the English television series by Anthony Jay and Jonathan Lynn, *Yes, Minister* and its sequel *Yes, Prime Minister*. Here the comedy

was classically designed to instruct with delight, radically demystifying the manipulations of the political establishment. This was didactic comedy, comedy that told something of the truth about reverend institutions and I acknowledge its influence gratefully. Who after watching it could ever again believe that a commission of inquiry was designed to do other than provide a whitewash? Who could ever expect ministers and prime-ministers to do other than lie? Who could ever again believe principles and policies took anything but second place to political survival? It was an extraordinarily subversive and educative show, even if arguably it also habituated us to an acceptance of the the manipulations it presented and in its exposés of bureaucracy promoted the Thatcherite ideology of deregulation and small government.

I chose representative episodes and situations that would reveal the reality of university life, and reveal them through comedy. There were a lot of anecdotes to draw on, not just from the universities where I had taught, but from those I had visited. And these anecdotes told from campus to campus had a generic consistency. I began to see certain archetypal patterns here, and it was on this aspect that I decided to focus. I wanted the book to be true to the realities of university life, but not to focus on recognisable individuals. For obvious reasons I did not want to be defamatory. Or if I was perhaps tempted, I realized that it wasn't a good idea. So I decided to focus on archetypal incidents and create fully fictional characters. The characters might incorporate ticks or mannerisms or values observed in various individuals, and myself, over the years; but they were not conceived as portraits from the life, such as I had sometimes drawn in other fiction.

But I wanted the basic events to have the resonance of truth. Don'o Kim, who was one of those who encouraged me in the project, suggested I should make the book representative of society at large. The events of university life, that is, should be a way of representing a larger politics. I wasn't sure that the genre of academic novel, or the subject, were strong enough for that. I didn't want to make the book too portentous or pretentious. Nonetheless, some of that possibility of representing the larger society lingers there. If not representing society in microcosm, the project was certainly concerned to relate to society. Campuses and their fiction can seem like an enclosed and isolated Arcadian enclave. But I tried to make a point of showing connections with other worlds. Life, thank heavens, is not just an endless campus novel. The characters include a bank robber and a con-man and a working girl and an American friend. Dope-smoking Pawley insists on an unreconstructed 1970s radical conspiracy interpretation of the past and the present, and brings into focus political issues of control and surveillance. A couple of writers, Sam Samson and Francesca Templar, make an appearance from my study of the literary world, *Wildest Dreams*. And magic and otherworldly realms come in at the novel's end, to suggest that there are other realities. When my former tutor in Medieval Literature, Douglas Grey, visited from Oxford in the mid 1970s he asked if I would check the annotations in a book once belonging to the Elizabethan alchemist, Dr John Dee, and now held in Fisher Library, for Julian Roberts' and Andrew G. Watson's definitive *John Dee's Library Catalogue*. It took a week or so for the library to locate the volume – like Edgar Allen Poe's

purloined letter it was on display, in a glass cabinet. Having looked through it, I arranged to have the pages containing annotations photographed, but it returned unphotographed. It was sent back to photography and then became lost in the system. It took some further weeks before it was found again and photographed. The librarians agreed there was some magical resistance going on. Though others remarked that it would have been more persuasively magical, given the decline of the university and its facilities, if the book had been photographed with no problems or delays.

Necessarily, as it charts the destruction of the universities, *Academia Nuts* has its serious note. Many of my fellow academics are amongst those not laughing now. John Lucas and Carole Ferrier both told me how painful they found it. Brian Kiernan remarked sadly that Richard Crabtree's *Southerly* review of the novel seemed to find our wretched last years the subject of mirth. In *The Times Higher Education Supplement* Laurie Taylor expressed his doubts that campus novels could any longer be comic: 'A witty campus novel? In 2004? It seemed as likely as a holiday romance set amid the tropical delights of Guantanamo Bay. Where in the technological, bureaucratic confines of the modern university was there room for the happy academic indulgences and airy pretensions and self-conscious posturings that were once juicy fodder for Bradbury and Lodge and Amis?' But in the end he laughed. 'It is politically incorrect. Appallingly so. But it is also very funny. So funny that I had to stop reading it in bed in case my roars of laughter were disturbing the neighbours: so funny that it deserves to be the final great campus novel. It is unlikely to be challenged. For what Wilding's aged unreconstructed dons are playing with such absurd brio is unmistakably the last waltz.'

I forget which president of the USA it was who particularly upset novelists. I think it was Nixon but it could have been any of them. The enormity of his behaviour, his lies and deceptions and plots and fabrications were so extreme that novelists began to complain that his behaviour far exceeded anything that the fictional imagination could ever put into a novel. No one would believe in a character like that. Readers would reject the book in disbelief. Reality, as it was so called, had superseded fiction. It was putting novelists out of business. In the course of writing *Academia Nuts* I began to feel much the same way about the universities. Events began to outstrip my imagination. The unthinkable, the unimaginable, continually exceeded the most extreme imaginings I could come up with.

I had already completed the novel when it was reported that the vice-chancellor of one of the bigger Australian universities had resigned because of allegations of plagiarism. This was far more extraordinary than anything I had invented. Would anyone have believed such an incident? They would have said it was excessive, absurd, unrealistic. But I incorporated it into the second edition.

I must say I found the story hard to believe myself. I have few illusions about management, as university administrators now like to call themselves. I taught for a while on a campus where the president or vice-chancellor or CEO was under investigation for allegedly receiving kickbacks on plumbing contracts. The campus novelists there were vastly amused and we shared many a joke about it. But plagiarism. I suppose what amazed me was that senior management ever claimed to have

written or published anything, plagiarized or not. In *Academia Nuts* I have one of my characters deliver a tirade about such people. I quote:

'What sort of academic would become a Dean, a Pro-Vice-Chancellor, a Vice-Chancellor? Only one who was no longer concerned to teach, only one who was no longer concerned to research. The people who occupy these administrative roles are self-selected failures from the academy they presume to control. They are people whose teaching skills were so derisory that they avoided teaching by getting teaching relief for administrative duties, whose ability to write or research was so inadequate that they avoided research by hiring research assistants to do their research and write their publications for them. . .'

It is a tirade and I felt it sounded excessive. It was meant to sound excessive. Indeed, I felt the situation had become excessive. *Academia Nuts* has characters getting their research assistants to write their work for them. It has academics, or one academic, considering hiring a ghost-writer to write a book, as J. F. Kennedy and J. Edgar Hoover are said to have done. But plagiarism. I never thought of inventing that. Reality had gone beyond the imagination. And yet it was not the first time. Writing about *Academia Nuts,* Don Graham recalled: 'Well, at a university in Texas where I was teaching in the late 1960s, the university president was discovered to have plagiarized his dissertation and was, after much *Sturm und Drang*, dismissed and the degree stripped from him. At the time he held a post as Under-Secretary in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare under Lyndon B. Johnson. In fact, when this episode played out, he was the only "intellectual" left in the Johnson administration. Vowing to clear his name, the ex-university president instead entered into real estate, selling properties in rural Texas, and became a multi-millionaire. Such is life.'

Much of *Academia Nuts* consists of dialogue. Academics sit around in the common room or the faculty club and talk. In a sense, I suppose, I wanted to create some sort of surprise, some gentle shock effect. The comedy was to lie in the discrepancy between the expected and the actual. Instead of discussing abstruse scholarly issues, the minutiae of textual scholarship, the nature of truth, and so on, the academics in *Academia Nuts* mainly discuss, and indeed embody, the degeneration of the university. Instead of collegiality they demonstrate a deep dislike and suspicion of their fellow academics. This, after all, is the tradition of the campus novel. These are the expectations of the genre. This was my life.

Not any more. Or at least, not at the University of Sydney. The staff club, the university club as it was officially known, was closed down by senior management in the year *Academia Nuts* appeared. The characters in *Academia Nuts* eventually ceased going to their faculty club because their colleagues upset their digestion, the barman seemed like an informer, and they suspected the place was bugged. These were consciously extreme imaginings. But I never imagined the utter extremity of a university administration actually closing down its staff club.

I should have known, though. I had taught in the USA and been amazed to find academics there were not in the habit of having lunch together in the club or morning tea in the common room.

There were no staff clubs, no common rooms. It was the model of control. There was nowhere for people to sit around and hold conversations, to compare notes, to contrast different practices in different departments, to exchange information, to discuss change, to foment resistance, to tell jokes. Removing any focus for academics to meet is a basic way of keeping the staff separate and alienated, a basic way of preventing any co-operation, collegiality or rebellion. I knew things were bad but I failed to imagine how bad. The novelist outstripped by contemporary reality again. Inevitably I have come to speculate whether there is any future for the campus novel. As the universities crumble by the minute, will there be anything left to write about? As they become unimaginable, who will ever write about them any more?

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